

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

**MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**Held on Saturday 18 November 2023  
Via Video Conference**

**There were present: 63 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 Caroline referred to the launch of the new 'Vision to Reality' strategy, designed to deliver a society that works for autistic people. This builds on the 'Moonshot' programme which was developed the previous year and was based on widespread consultation with autistic people. A short video was shown, showing what the strategy meant to autistic people.
- 2.2 In addition to the 'Vision to Reality' for England and Wales, the new Scotland strategy had been launched while a strategy for Northern Ireland was in development.
- 2.3 Caroline then went on to describe the financial pressures assailing the charity through the year. These were not unique to the NAS; the whole social care sector had experienced soaring costs and increasing difficulties with the recruitment and retention of staff, while the pressures on local authority budgets meant that funding for social care was falling behind the costs of provision. In this environment, very difficult decisions had been required to address the financial losses and ensure the charity could continue its essential work into the future.
- 2.4 Consequently, we have embarked on a programme of change designed to make the organisation leaner and more efficient. We are investing in new systems and processes while driving down costs in our central corporate services. Some areas of our National Programmes have been restructured in order to focus on the delivery of our new strategy.

- 2.5 One decision that was difficult but which had to be taken was the decision to close two of our residential children's services while putting the third up for sale.
- 2.6 Our adult services have been particularly hard hit by the funding crisis in local authorities, rising costs and staffing pressures. To address these issues an adult services turnaround plan was instigated and is now delivering results. The quality of our services and the safety of the people we support have been the cornerstones of this work but without the necessary fee uplifts we can no longer provide our services safely and to the high standard that we and families expect and demand. Consequently, we have had to serve notice on a number of contracts and to close some services entirely.
- 2.7 Looking forward, the programme of change is ambitious but necessary and it will provide the foundation on which we can build and deliver our strategy.

### **3. HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE YEAR**

- 3.1 The chair, Steve Ladyman, then gave a presentation highlighting some of the successes from the year. Before describing these, however, he expressed his thanks to Caroline and her team for their dedication and very hard work in what had been a challenging time.
- 3.2 Steve said that underpinning the work to convert the vision of a world that works for autistic people into a reality are a number of initiatives. 'Autism Knowhow' is a new division bringing together those NAS services that support professionals working with autism. This division has the potential to make a massive difference to autistic people, transforming experiences in school, at work and in health and social care. During the year we provided live training for 7,000 health, social care and education professionals.
- 3.3 On line, an average of 9,000 people visit the NAS website every day while 3,690 people are involved in our on line community. The NAS has 116 branches and during the year we held our first Branches Awards ceremony.
- 3.4 We continued to push our politicians to make the urgent changes autistic people and their families need – for better education, timely diagnosis and more mental health support. Over 50,000 people campaigned with us.
- 3.5 We are working to enhance our guidance and advice services by developing a more integrated and joined-up approach. The aim is to offer substantial and practical advice and we are currently developing and expanding our topic offerings and exploring how we can use technology to reach even more people.
- 3.6 The 'Now I Know' campaign had broken down harmful stereotypes that see autistic women too often overlooked and undiagnosed. It had also encouraged non-binary autistic women to tell their stories. This campaign had reached over 1 million people over social media and the overall media reach was over 2 million people.

3.7 Finally, Steve expressed his heartfelt thanks to both staff and volunteers and indeed, to all those who supported the charity in any way through the year, including its members.

#### **4. NAS ARTICLES**

4.1 The chair referred to the tabled resolution to agree to revisions to the NAS Articles. These are the governing document that sets out the rules for how the organisation is run. The Articles were first drafted long before the internet was a reality and so meetings of members had to be conducted face to face. However, during the Covid lockdown it became essential to hold AGMs on line and it was apparent that this allowed more people to participate without the need to make expensive and time consuming journeys to attend the AGM in person. It was therefore proposed to update the Articles to embed the power to hold future meetings on line, making them accessible to members across the UK and overseas.

4.2 Voting on the resolution to adopt the revised Articles would take place shortly and members were reminded not to vote if they had already submitted a postal vote as their second vote would not count.

#### **5. NEW TRUSTEE**

5.1 One new trustee had been recruited during the year and the chair advised that the board had required someone with the experience and qualifications to lead on safeguarding. He was therefore delighted to be able to introduce Pamela Marden, who met those requirements perfectly.

5.2 Pamela then spoke, describing her career in social care with experience of safeguarding for both children and adults. A qualified social worker, she had been both a director of social care and before retiring, she had been chair of the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Board. She was chair of trustees for a visual impairment charity in the West Country and with the NAS she would be a member of the Independent Safeguarding Board and the Quality and Compliance committee.

#### **6. VOTING**

6.1 Members were then asked to vote using the link that had been forward to:

- i. Confirm the minutes of the 2022 AGM
- ii. Adopt the revised Articles

6.2 Later in the meeting when the votes had been counted, the chair confirmed that both motions had been carried by substantial majorities (100% for the minutes and 95% for the Articles).

## **7. PRESENTATION ON THE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE**

- 4.1 Edward Caddle, Chair of the Finance Committee, observed that this was his 4<sup>th</sup> AGM at which he had presented the financial report. He noted that the full annual report and audited accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023 are available on the NAS website.
- 4.2 As had been mentioned already, it had been a difficult year from a financial perspective. This had been particularly true in adult services where a combination of staffing challenges and increased use of agency staff, together with inadequate fees paid by local authorities had caused significant losses. Across the charity as a whole income had risen by 3.8% but costs had grown by 9.7%.
- 4.3 Conversely, the cash position had remained strong, largely because of a growth in creditors, albeit these would have to be paid in due course. A revaluation of the local government pension scheme to which a number of NAS employees belong had reduced the NAS' liability from £11.7m to £4m. This had no practical effect on the NAS' earnings or immediate cash flow but nonetheless it provided a welcome easing to the long-term cashflow.
- 4.4 Edward drew attention to the inclusion of figures relating to the NAS Academies Trust (NASAT) in the accounts. Largely as a result of government policy, NASAT had been transferred out from the NAS Group at the end of 2022, becoming an independent organisation. However, the NAS accounts had to include figures for NASAT for the 9 months of the year up to that point.
- 4.5 Turning to the financial highlights, the charity had moved from a net surplus of £0.8m in 2022 to a deficit of £4.4m in 2023. With NASAT excluded, the equivalent figures were a surplus of £1.4m and a deficit of £3.7m.
- 4.6 Looking forward, we will continue to face restraints on our income as local authorities struggle with their budgets while costs continue to rise. For example, while we had the benefit of a fixed price contract for our energy costs, this is now coming to an end and our bill for gas and electricity will increase by £1m. We also face capital expenditure to maintain and replenish our properties, including our schools, offices and adult services.
- 4.7 That said, we are acting to address these challenges. The turnaround plan for Adult Services is delivering results through the renegotiation of fees to reflect increased costs, continually reviewing all costs for efficiency and minimising our use of agency staff. However, where services are not financially viable, then we must consider alternative options.
- 4.8 We are carrying out strategic reviews of our service portfolio – Education and Adult Services – and we are continuing to drive down our central support costs. We will also dispose of surplus assets and invest in technology to deliver increased productivity.

- 4.9 Our aim is to achieve a break-even position in adult services before the end of the year and we are confident we can achieve this. The key is to have viable services in both our schools and adult services with both divisions covering their long term costs. The strategic reviews will identify the best structures to help them achieve this.
- 4.10 Summarising, Edward said that the 2022/23 financial performance was disappointing but cash remains strong, as does the balance sheet overall. In addition, the reduction in the pension liability reduces the risk to long-term liquidity. However, in the near term, it is essential to bring income and expenditure into line and this will require some difficult decisions.
- 4.11 We need to focus on cost reduction and managing the portfolio of services to ensure adequate contribution to cover a reasonable level of central support costs. Overall, However, Edward noted that the management team has done and is doing a great job to turn around the organisation's financial performance.

## **5. GUEST SPEAKER – DAVID CARTER**

- 5.1 The chair then introduced the guest speaker, David Carter, a volunteer at the NAS Southampton branch.
- 5.2 David introduced himself as the parent of a 30 years old autistic son and husband to an autistic wife. He described how he and his wife had decided back in 2004 to set up a support group and to their surprise, 36 people attended the first meeting.
- 5.3 This was the start of what became the NAS branch in Southampton. Following on from the support group, a family youth group was formed and the range of activities continued to grow. The branch now has 800 members and a regular programme of activities, including a Lego club and social groups for both children and adults. A recent development is a 'partner group' specifically for partners of autistic people and to David's knowledge, this group has saved two marriages.
- 5.4 In addition, the branch now has a lending library and organises boat trips and visits to the zoo and the local science centre. Seminars and training events are also organised.
- 5.5 David and his wife are members of the Hampshire Autism Partnership Board which includes four local authorities. The Board has done great work to deliver training and to spread understanding of autism.
- 5.6 David described the biggest challenge in running the branch as being the constant struggle to find willing volunteers. On occasion, events have to be cancelled at short notice because there is no volunteer available to run them.
- 5.7 The chair thanked David for his presentation and extended his thanks to all those volunteers who are helping to run branches. From his time as an MP the

chair had been well aware of the power of branches to lobby politicians and to make real changes in local communities.

## **6. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

- 6.1 When the residential service at Robert Ogden School had been closed, why was there only one month's notice?

Responding to this, Caroline Stevens said that a decision to close a service is always very difficult and is not taken lightly. However, once the decision has been made then the process is governed by employment legislation with strict timetables relating to the staff consultation and notice periods. If closure had been planned over a longer period then we would have lost critical staff who would naturally be looking for alternative employment and closure would have been forced in an unplanned way.

The chair added that the board always struggles with decisions to close services, recognising the impact on families.

- 6.2 A member said that she works as a listening volunteer with the Samaritans and she found it very difficult to refer people to the NAS as there is no obvious 'phone number.

The chair offered his thanks to all those who give their time to the Samaritans. He went on to say that we are looking at how we provide help and support and would pass this feedback to the team. In the meantime, he suggested that callers could ring the switchboard on 0207 833 2299 and leave a message, which would be returned.

- 6.3 A member referred to the information on Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome (PDA) on the website, saying it was neither correct nor objective and asking how published material of this kind is agreed.

Responding, Caroline Stevens said that this is a sensitive topic and the charity has received a good deal of feedback which is being reviewed. However, the Society is led by the best available evidence and there is a very robust process in place to review evidence and agree what should be published. This process is set out on the website.

- 6.4 A member asked how she could become more involved to support the NAS' work in Scotland.

The chair's advice was to look at the website which provides Scotland specific contact details and to follow these up, pointing out that she is an autistic person looking to become involved.

- 6.5 The chair then put a question to Edward Caddle, asking if the NAS is going in the right direction from a financial perspective.

Edward confirmed that we are indeed with tremendous progress made to increase the fees we need and to reduce both agency and central costs. However, these things take time and the full results of this work will not be apparent immediately.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

- 7.1 Time having almost run out, the chair then brought the meeting to a close. He advised that all the questions and answers, whether discussed during the meeting or not, would be published on the website.
- 7.2 He then offered his thanks to his fellow trustees on the board, all of whom give their time unpaid, and to the management and staff. He also thanked the charity's volunteers and campaigners for the tremendous work they do and suggested that if any member was not in a branch then they should think about joining one!
- 7.3 Finally, he thanked the presenters and the technical team who had made the meeting possible. He then brought the meeting to a close.