

# News and Views

From the National Autistic Society  
Scotland and our volunteers

Winter 2024

## Celebrating One Year of *Empower Up!*

### **Our *Empower Up* Programme recently celebrated it's one year anniversary!**

The programme is aimed at autistic young people between the ages of 12 and 19 who are living in Glasgow (and surrounding areas). Participants in the programme benefit from structured support to build and develop social navigation strategies and confidence. Social Groups are also created to encourage the development of peer friendships, and some

young people have made 'friends for life' within the programme.

*Empower Up* now also has some fresh new branding, with a new logo and social media assets! The branding was designed by Gallusness in partnership with the *Empower Up* participants. The young people were involved in every stage of the process, from the initial concept to the final design. Several meetings were held between the designer and the young people,

to ensure that the new logo was a perfect fit for the programme. The stars featured in the logo are a particular favourite of the young people, as each star is a different shape and colour in order to represent the way that every autistic person is unique.

Joanne Shields, Social Programmes Coordinator, said:

"For a lot of the young people that take part in the programme, this is the first time they have felt safe

and comfortable in a social environment. It's amazing to see the changes in confidence and self-esteem, from the beginning of the programme to the end, and I'm proud of every single one of them."

Gabriela, a Participant in the *Empower Up* Programme said:

"I absolutely love how the *Empower Up* project provides a space for autistic people to openly discuss about their differences or struggles in a judgement-free environment. I feel it's of utmost importance that spaces like these continue existing, as being autistic in current society can be extremely isolating. Providing opportunities for autistic individuals to interact with one another is crucial."



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## FROM OUR EDITOR

The teenage years are a tough time for everyone. First, you're a kid who has a lot of time to play games and all sorts (mostly, depending on your family situation). Then, during your teens, you are drip fed the realities of adult life.

Some choose to take refuge through books, video games, and other distractions that they can control. The outside world is messy, after all.

Ideally, one is introduced to adult life through a structured environment. Usually this is in the form of school. But school can only do so much. Sure, school tells you that the mitochondria are the powerhouse of the cell, but can it teach you how to handle relationships with others and how to use them in life?

For autistic teenagers, that is the fundamental problem. Mainstream school doesn't usually do classes on handling conflicts and emotions. Without assistance, they struggle to cope later life and the messy outside world. They need a map to guide them.

This is why things, like the *Empower Up* programme, exist. They provide the structured support needed for young people to learn the social map most of us learn through osmosis. Without these programmes, many teens may not get the fulfilling adult life they deserve.



**Gordon Wallace**  
Editor

*Gordon's illustration of empowerment*

# AWARD WIN FOR AUTISM SUPPORT AYRSHIRE

Congratulations to our Autism Support Ayrshire service who recently won the “Community Organisation Wellbeing Superheroes” award at the North Ayrshire Health & Social Care awards ceremony. Congratulations to Lynsey, Patsy, and Georgia!

The Autism Support Ayrshire team provide free and confidential information, advice, and guidance to individuals, parents, carers, and professionals in North, South, and East Ayrshire. Autism Support Ayrshire services are free to use, and include workshops, advice and guidance, signposting, and online social activities. The service is funded by North, South and East Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnerships.



Award ceremony

The team have also recently established a brand-new Facebook page! Please make sure to follow the page to stay up to date with the service:  
[facebook.com/NASautismsupportayrshire](https://www.facebook.com/NASautismsupportayrshire)

# update

## FROM OUR DIRECTOR



**Hello everyone, and welcome to the Winter edition of *News and Views*!**

I am delighted to see that the *Empower Up* project has had such a successful first year. It is great to see the positive impact that the project has had so far, and I look forward to seeing how the project progresses in 2025. It is incredibly important to ensure that autistic young people receive the support they need to develop their confidence and make friends. The new branding looks brilliant, and it is made all the more special due to the involvement of the young people in its creation.

In December, we launched our *Embrace Autism* report. The findings of the report are fantastic, and I am very happy to see that many autistic adults have benefited from the programme so far. Sadly, there is very little pre or post diagnostic support available to autistic adults, which means that many people are left on their own to figure out what being autistic means to them. I am therefore delighted that our *Embrace Autism* project has been so successful, and I look forward to seeing how the project progresses in 2025.

Overall, 2024 was an excellent year for our organisation, and I'd like to thank our staff for all your hard work!



**Rob Holland**  
Director of National Autistic Society Scotland

## Embrace Autism Celebrates Success with Report Launch

**We've launched a report to celebrate the success of Embrace Autism!**

Embrace Autism is a programme of pre- and post-diagnostic support for recently diagnosed or self-identifying autistic adults across Scotland, entirely designed and directly delivered by autistic professionals.

The programme is an equal partnership between NAS Scotland and Autistic Knowledge Development, an autistic-led, not-for-profit autism think tank. *Embrace Autism* is funded by Inspiring

Scotland through the Scottish Government's Autistic Adult Support Fund (AASF).

It is clear from the report that it improves autistic adults' sense of purpose, their understanding of their autism, and most importantly how they feel about being autistic:

- 1 in 4 felt no purpose in life when they started the programme, which reduced to 1 in 10 afterwards
- Before taking part, 44% did not feel part of a community at all, which reduced to 14% after taking part



Embrace Autism Event

- Before taking part, 6% of participants had a clear idea of what being autistic meant to them which increased to 33% after taking part
- 33% of participants felt acceptance about being autistic and 13% felt positive about it before starting the programme, which increased to 51% and 27% respectively afterwards

## Moving Forward Report Launches!



The *Moving Forward+* team recently shared their 2023-24 annual report, which highlights the positive impact of *Moving*

*Forward+* on the lives of autistic children and young people. 62% of participants improved their relationship with school or achieved a positive destination.

This year's positive destinations included college courses in journalism, illustration & multimedia, employment in IT and home care, training in the creative arts and a pre-apprenticeship construction training programme.

The *Moving Forward+* team remain grateful to the Scottish Government's CashBack for

Communities programme which funds the programme and enables the team to deliver a holistic and person-centred service that works for autistic children and young people.

A participant in the programme said:

**It gave me an opportunity to connect with someone and to understand myself better. I feel like I have a solid support network and a better routine and structure in my life.**

## Social Programmes Highlight

At the end of 2024, our Social Programmes Team went through some changes, as Sandra, Joanne, and Angela received promotions! We asked the team to share some highlights from their time working at the National Autistic Society Scotland so far.

Firstly, after 20 years of working at NAS, Sandra Buckley was promoted to Programmes Manager!

**Sandra said: 'I have worked with NAS Scotland as Social Programmes Manager for 20 years. When I began, my goal was to support 45 autistic adults across Scotland. During the Covid-19 pandemic, our team supported 200 people weekly. It has been rewarding to see individuals progress from groups members to volunteers, giving back to their communities.'**

**Recently I moved to the role of Programmes Manager - an exciting new step. I look forward to embracing new opportunities and challenges.'**



Secondly, Joanne Shields and Angela Kennedy, who have both spent over four years working at NAS after two years of volunteering, were promoted to Social Programmes Coordinators!

**Joanne said:**

**'A highlight for me is seeing the young people I began working with 4 years ago, grow and become more confident. Young people that were so shy and anxious that they couldn't put their camera or mic on and would only stay on the group for half the time, have now trained as volunteers and are so valuable in the delivery of projects for young people. Investing in these young people really paid off because they've given back tenfold. It's the best job and so fulfilling.'**



**Angela said:**

**'My first involvement with NAS was when my son attended a project that Sandra Buckley ran in his high school. A highlight for me is seeing our Connections members become more confident. For a lot of our members, socialising with other members was their first time socialising outwith their own family setting, and they are now making friends, meeting up and trying different things within their communities.'**

## Highland Success at Branch Awards



Carrie Watts

The Branch Awards took place on the 14th of November and featured three Scotland wins!

Carrie Watts, from the National Autistic Society Scotland's Highland Branch, won the Autistic Branch Volunteer of the Year award, and the award for Young Branch Volunteer of the Year went to Susannah Coulson, from the Nairn Children's Group. Finally, the Highland Branch also won an award for the most Outstanding Branch Event of the Year! Congratulations to all winners for the work they do to support autistic people.

Additionally, Carrie and Hannah (NAS Highland volunteers), recently featured in a YouTube film for the Pines YouTube channel. This is an amazing film which gives incredible insight into the autistic experience. The YouTube channel includes 80 films, which are all made by autistic people or autism professionals. Carrie and Hannah are both autistic and have neurodivergent families.

Don't forget to watch the film:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=T14oImOUvoQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T14oImOUvoQ)

## Growing Up event

On the 4th of December, we held the first *Growing Up* In-Person Information and Support session in Clockwise. We were delighted to welcome 25 parent carers to the session, alongside speakers from Parent Network Scotland, the Association for Real Change, and our partners from Carers Scotland.

The highlight of the day was hearing from Laura, a member of the Carers Voices Group, who shared her personal experiences as a parent carer. The event was very informative, and it was incredible to see so many of the parent carers connecting with each other. A special thank you to Gina and Joanne for coming along and talking about Branches and the *Empower Up* project.

Adam Petrie, *Growing Up* Project Manager, said:

'I was over the moon to see so many parent carers come together and deeply resonate with our guest speakers. It was a very enjoyable day, and the mince pies were particularly delicious! We very much look forward to holding more *Growing Up* events for parent carers in the new year.'

For more information about the *Growing Up* Project, please see our web page below  
[www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/scotland/growing-up](https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/scotland/growing-up)



*Growing Up* event

## Machu Picchu Fundraising Trip

**Laura McClintock, owner of Nevermore Tattoo & Piercing, and Lisa Davidson, owner of Tinkerbell's Emporium, have been raising money for the National Autistic Society Scotland since 2021.**

Laura and Lisa's shops face each other on Friar's Street in Stirling and, through working together on a variety of events, they have raised over £12,525 for the National Autistic Society Scotland!

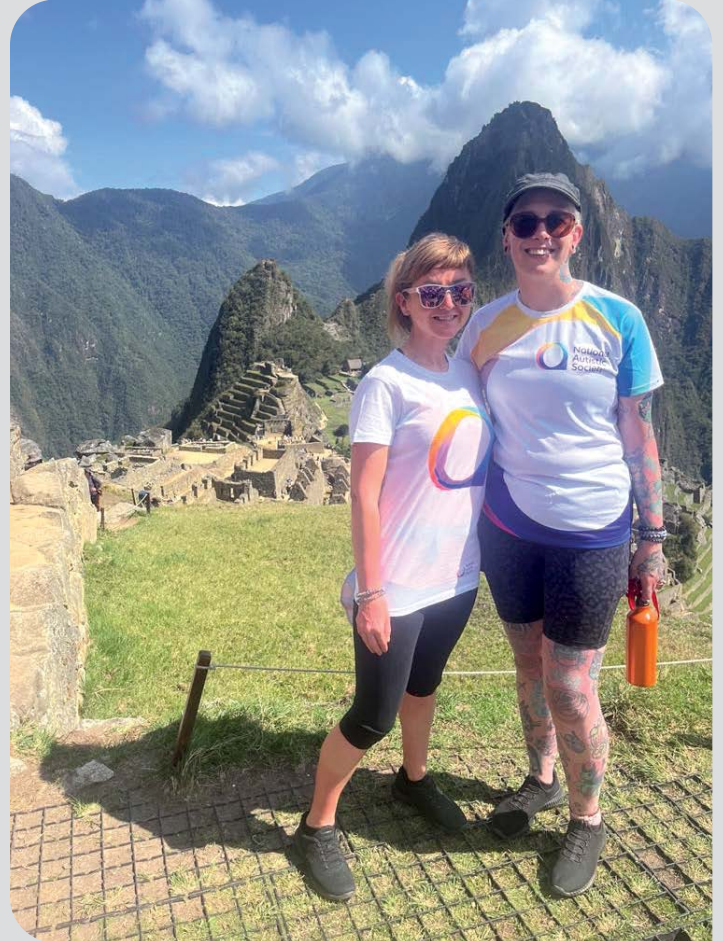
In October, Laura and Lisa travelled to Peru to hike the Ancasconcha trail and the Inca trail to Machu Picchu.

Laura said:

"Fundraising for NAS Scotland has been so rewarding. We have held so many events and run raffles and competitions. It has been amazing to bring the community together to raise awareness and funds for this wonderful charity. Our last, and by far our biggest, challenge was trekking the Ancasconcha trail and the Inca trail, taking us to Machu Picchu. The sense of achievement and the breathtaking wonder that overcame us coming through the sun gate to overlook Machu Picchu was indescribable. Spreading the word of the charity across the world has been a pleasure and an honour, and we are so proud to have been a part of this. Now we just need to work out what we can take on next for NAS!"

Lisa said:

"The trip was life changing. It was my biggest challenge to date, yet I was humbled by how inspirational it was to so many others. Machu Picchu was one of the most incredible places I've ever seen, the history, mystery and magic will stay with me for my lifetime, and I am so truly grateful and honoured to have been able to complete this on behalf of The National Autistic Society Scotland."



Laura and Lisa

**Well done Laura and Lisa and a huge thank you from everyone at NAS Scotland!**

## Fancy raising money for us?

We have a wide range of in-person and virtual events for you to take part in, and lots of fundraising ideas if you would like to do your own thing. Visit our website to find out more [www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/raise-money](http://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/raise-money)



## New Year's Resolutions for 2025

At the end of last year, we asked the Scotland staff team to share their New Year's resolution or goal for 2025:

**Rob Holland**, Director: 'Learn to cook some new dishes!'

**Suzi Martin**, External Affairs Manager: 'Mine is to eat one piece of fruit every day!'

**Olivia Ayres**, Engagement Support Officer: 'My new year's resolution is to try to explore new hobbies and activities.'

**Victoria Castelli-MacLennan**, Engagement Support Manager: 'My new year's resolution is to go on a lunchtime walk as often as possible, particularly during the Winter.'

**Jim Doherty**, Prospects Programme Manager: 'To get the bathroom door painted, as I've been procrastinating for ages.'

**Hannah Inglis**, Employment Support Coordinator: 'To stop doom scrolling on Instagram.'

**Alexandra West**, Policy and Public Affairs Officer: 'My new year's resolution is to start running again so I can do at least one 5K competition within the year.'

**Regina Vereker**, Senior Branch Engagement Officer: 'To meditate more as it helps me a lot, but I keep forgetting to do it.'

**Carol Keatings**, Business and Projects Coordinator: 'To get fitter for a walking holiday in the Summer.'

**Joanne Shields**, Social Programmes Coordinator: 'To be less stressed over things outwith my control.'

**Heather Carson**, Media and Communications Officer: 'To stick to a regular writing routine and finish my second book.'

**Laura Murrie**, Social Group Leader: 'To reach my peak fitness level to be able to compete in the Hyrox'

**Billy Docherty**, Employment Consultant: 'My New Year resolution will be to try and commute to work via bicycle to feel fitter and healthier!'



## Job opportunities

### Do you...

- want a rewarding job that offers satisfaction, variety and flexibility?
- enjoy working with people and want to make a real difference?
- have excellent life skills that you can share?

To find out about our current vacancies and more opportunities with the National Autistic Society Scotland, please visit [www.autism.org.uk/jobs](http://www.autism.org.uk/jobs) or contact our HR team at [scotlandHR@nas.org.uk](mailto:scotlandHR@nas.org.uk)

## Are you a member of the National Autistic Society Scotland?

If not, you can join our growing community of over 1,200 people in Scotland and play a vital role in our charity's work. Our package of benefits includes our quarterly members' magazine, *Your Autism*, and discounts on our events. To find out more, please call our Supporter Care team on **0808 800 1050**.

## About us

**The National Autistic Society Scotland is here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people.**

**We transform lives** by providing support, information and practical advice for the 56,000 autistic adults and children in Scotland, as well as their family members and carers.

Autistic people turn to us at key moments or challenging times in their lives, be it getting a diagnosis, going to school or finding work.

**We change attitudes** by improving public understanding of autism and the difficulties many autistic people face.

We also work closely with businesses, local authorities and government to help them provide more autism-friendly spaces, deliver better services and improve laws.

We have come a long way but it is not good enough.

There is still so much to do to increase opportunities, reduce social isolation and build a brighter future for people on the autism spectrum. With your help, we can make it happen.