



“A better life
for people
with autism”



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WHAT WE DO

For over 50 years, Autism Together has been providing support to people with autism, offering a wide range of residential services, supported living, day services and community support from our base in Wirral, UK.

Research has shown that specialist education and structured support can really make a difference to the life of a person with autism. Every person with autism is unique, so we work with each individual to help them overcome the difficulties autism presents them with, enabling them to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life.

As a specialist provider of support to those with autism, our organisation recognises each person has a right to live their life as they choose.

We create a shared understanding of each person's strengths and needs, ensuring their preferred way of communicating these is respected and implemented by all our staff.

Our support approaches and strategies are focused on developing lifelong learning, helping to develop people's skills by considering their communication needs, thinking patterns, social understanding and sensory differences.

OUR PHILOSOPHY remains firmly rooted in a belief that:

We begin with what people can do, not with what they can't do, by listening to each individual and acknowledging that they are the expert in their autism.

Our support begins with the person, along with a shared understanding of what is important to them and what their strengths and needs are.

Our support approaches are individualised so that staff can meet each person's communication needs. Staff are trained to be consistent in the way they use communication strategies with individuals.

A photograph of two men in a forest setting, engaged in a hands-on activity. The man on the left is wearing a dark jacket with a Mercedes-Benz logo and is smiling. The man on the right is wearing a dark hoodie and glasses, and is focused on a task. They are working with wooden planks and a power tool. The background is a dense forest of trees.

OUR MISSION

To help people with autism develop their full potential and achieve their aspirations by delivering high quality, person-centred support.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO

SUE STUBBS

Last autumn, I was delighted to be appointed CEO of this fantastic organisation where our talented, passionate and dedicated staff team make a huge difference to the lives of the people we support. Little did I imagine that within six months, we would be facing an unprecedented global pandemic!

We have outlined our response to Covid-19 on page 8 of this Annual Report, however, I do not wish that to overshadow the other brilliant work we have done throughout the 2019/20 year. It's been an action-packed period and I am exceptionally proud of what we have achieved in an incredibly challenging time for the sector.

During the autumn, the Trustees and Senior Leadership Team took the opportunity to revisit our vision, mission, values and long-term strategic objectives. Our new Strategic Plan will provide a road map for the next five years and you can read more about this on the next page.

This 2019/20 Annual Report is full of examples of how we are fulfilling our mission to help people with autism develop their potential and achieve their aspirations by delivering high quality, person-centred support. They demonstrate the fantastic achievements of the people we support across our services, supported by our incredible

staff team. While we celebrate our achievements, we also recognise the challenges we have faced.

The significant delays to starting the refurbishment of Helen House, now renamed The Maples, were frustrating for all and we were devastated to have caused disruption to those who rely on our short stay respite services. However, despite additional delays due to the lockdown period, the refurbishment is now complete and I am delighted to report we opened for our first respite stays in July 2020.

One of our key strategic objectives is to be financially sustainable. This has been a landmark year as we reached our targeted free reserves of £1.5m, giving us a much-needed financial cushion as we face the uncertainties of Covid-19, providing reassurance to our staff, the people we support and their families about the long-term stability of Autism Together. I would like to thank all our supporters, donors, commissioners and families for their continued support.

Finally, what has resonated with me most since my appointment is the commitment of our staff in putting the people we support at the centre of all we do. Despite facing their own personal anxieties and challenges, our staff have ensured the people we support have been kept safe, engaged and entertained throughout this terrible pandemic. For that, I would like to truly thank them.



FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

1 Provide person-centred and high quality services for people with autism across the spectrum

We will achieve this by further developing our person-centred approach that allows for the appropriate support, development, progression and increased independence of the people we support. We will provide services that meet the highest standards, respond to best practice and new guidance in social care and give the people we support a real say in shaping those services.

2 Develop our autism services

We will explore opportunities to expand and develop our services focusing on up to date, cost-effective operating models and ensuring they meet modern commissioning intentions. We will also re-establish our short stay services on our Raby site.

3 Develop and invest in our staff

We will achieve this by improving employee engagement and satisfaction through communication, training, remuneration and employee benefit packages. We will work with staff to improve their health and wellbeing, including providing mental health support. We will continue to offer our staff sector-leading autism training, working with our internal trainers and external training partners to provide a range

of management and autism training to motivate and support staff with their career ambitions.

4 Invest in our infrastructure and assets

We will achieve this by developing and implementing our property strategy in addition to identifying and implementing technology solutions that will improve our efficiency, aid the delivery of our services and improve people's lives. We will ensure our support services are effective, efficient and appropriately funded and resourced.

5 Be financially sustainable

We will achieve this by maintaining financial accountability and continually monitoring the financial performance of all our services and use this to inform development opportunity. We will continually monitor our key financial risks, ensuring that risk mitigation plans are in place. We will develop and implement our fundraising strategy.

6 Raise autism awareness and acceptance, and promote autism good practice

We will achieve this by developing our external training offer, collaborating with local organisations and service providers, and contributing to the national voice in order to help raise awareness, rights and opportunities for people with autism.

Letter from the chair **ANDREW DAVIES**



When I wrote last year's report I looked forward to a year of steady progress on a number of the issues mentioned. Little did I know that our charity would face such

unprecedented challenges through the global pandemic arising from the Covid-19 virus.

It is right to start therefore by highlighting the outstanding performance of the entire AT team and, particularly, the front-line care workers and their managers. The pandemic has been described in some political quarters as being akin to fighting a world war. If so, I have no hesitation in describing the performance of our organisation as representing its finest hour. It has been a combined feat of both organisation – through the protective bubbles built up around our houses – and dedication by the staff involved.

The board have supported practical measures to show our appreciation of front-line staff, ensuring that all involved benefitted from a 12-week pay supplement. Our aim remains to ultimately improve pay for our care staff on a more permanent basis.

It's not all about Covid however. Last summer the trustees appointed Sue Stubbs as our new chief executive. The board was concerned about the lack of clear strategic objectives and Sue worked closely with trustees and the senior staff to produce a whole raft of policy documents which were considered by the board in December 2019. Subsequently, the board approved a strategic plan in January 2020 and then a very detailed operational plan, putting the flesh on those objectives.

One of our priorities is to gradually improve the quality

of the properties we own or lease and to ensure they are autism friendly. We are trying to move to the concept of people in supported living having their own 'front door.' Trustees have therefore highlighted the importance of developing a property strategy to support the broader objectives of the organisation. We have supported projects such as a new flats scheme in Oxtou and approved significant resources to completely refurbish Helen House (now The Maples) to re-launch our valuable respite service.

On the matter of finance, during the present pandemic, Autism Together has been underpinned by our much-improved financial position. Many other charities have struggled to cope. As someone said, the rainy day, for which we have been building up savings, has now come and our financial strength has been a protective umbrella.

OUR COVID-19 RESPONSE

JANE CAROLAN

DEPUTY CEO AND DIR OF OPS



Like other services across the country, we have been responding to coronavirus during much of 2020. At the start of the pandemic, as the country went into strict lockdown conditions, we took steps to ensure we kept the people we support and our colleagues safe and well.

We created safety bubbles for each service, with only those staff allocated to that bubble entering the property and covering shifts. We created a small shop for essential goods, so that staff and people we support did not have to go to the local shops, and we delivered shopping, PPE and essential items to our

We need to constantly keep vigilant as a charity. We have a rigorous approach to safeguarding but we must not relax our guard for a moment. Nor must our broader responsibilities as an autism charity be forgotten. Our role is not just to care for those people living in residential and supported living arrangements. It is also to help ensure that they and the numerous other people with autism in our wider community have the ability, with support, to participate in the daily and social activities most of us take for granted.

I am optimistic about the future of our charity. We have a talented senior leadership team under Sue Stubbs and a board of trustees with a wide range of relevant skills and experience. Covid-19 has been a huge challenge but the work goes on to meet the aims and objectives of the organisation's founders all those years ago.

services to limit the amount of people moving around the organisation.

Our head office closed and many staff worked from home. We got so much support from the local community in the early days of the pandemic, with many pubs and restaurants donating food and other supplies.

Not being able to go to their favourite places was potentially challenging and difficult for the people we support. But with the help of our staff, they coped extremely well with these changes.

To support people to enjoy activities in their homes and services, some of our day service staff ran online competitions and groups. We had our own online PE teacher, and many people enjoyed opportunities to do home activities like baking and gardening.

MESSAGE FROM 2020 CHAIR

CATH AMES

It is a privilege to have become the new Chair of Trustees. I will do my utmost to build on our successes over the last 51 years. Whilst other organisations talk of rebuilding after Covid, Autism Together does not need to rebuild - it has continued its work throughout. Thank you to all our staff and families for your support. Whilst our vital work continues I hope we can also celebrate our successes and tackle our planned developments over the next year.



Our staff followed guidance on use of PPE and now wear masks for the whole of their shifts. Some of the people we support struggled with staff wearing masks, but with understanding and communication all those we support are now used to staff wearing masks and tolerate this.

Staff are tested weekly in our care homes and, where possible, we are testing the people we support monthly. We are already planning and risk-assessing to make sure we are able to respond quickly and flexibly to new guidance, policies and procedures as winter approaches.

The managers of our services have worked tirelessly to keep people safe and respond to the new guidance. The staff have gone above and beyond in order to keep people safe, well, calm and engaged, while looking after their own mental health. Thank you to them all.

A YEAR OF ACHIEVEMENT



Welcome to a year in the life of Autism Together. The past 12 months has seen a new CEO arrive, local dignitaries have visited to unveil new facilities within our services, we have opened new premises for the public and community to enjoy, and we've even won a national award for our autism training.

Here are just some of our achievements and highlights from this last year...

CONTINUING TO OFFER EXPERT AUTISM SUPPORT

Our Admissions team has completed over 60 assessments and supported 41 transitions into Autism Together services. The assessment process has been updated and redesigned in line with Positive Behaviour Support values.

A new supported living property was opened in Ellesmere Port in November 2019 for three individuals from the Cheshire West area. This has been a very successful project with the individuals settling in really well – all three now attend CVS as part of their weekly routine.

WORKING WITH THE PREMIER LEAGUE CHAMPIONS

Following a presentation by the Children & Family Service (CFS) to Liverpool Football Club Foundation, Autism Together have been meeting with the LFC Foundation to discuss potential partnership work through the delivery of Open Goals sessions in local parks and Autism Multi-Sports sessions organised by the Inclusion team and the CFS. These events are due to start once lockdown restrictions allow. We are

hopeful this will be an exciting new partnership for the future.

Speaking of Liverpool, our Fundraising Team met Premier League-winning manager Jurgen Klopp in February and were given some signed merchandise to auction to raise money for Autism Together. The resulting auction took place online and raised almost £400.

WELLBEING SUPPORT

A focus this year has been around wellness and staff mental health. Coronavirus, more recently, has had an understandable impact on staff and the HR team has introduced a number of support opportunities in these areas.

One-to-one advice and counselling sessions have proved very popular, with many individuals booking in to take advantage of this service provided by ATAS. Also popular has been the series of evening sessions for parents and carers covering help and guidance on a range of day-to-day issues.

RECRUITMENT IS KEY

Recruitment has been a key focus for HR this year with the team recruiting 190 new starters.

Helping the staffing situation was the reduction in the number of vacancies and a significant reduction in staff turnover. This has been supported by the team's ongoing work in improving communication and engagement with staff in general.

New recruits to Autism Together receive an intensive induction, covering the equivalent of three weeks across a seven-week period, followed by regular refreshers, all conducted by our award-winning Autism Training and Advisory Service (ATAS).

POSITIVE PBS APPROACH

Having introduced a Positive Behavioural Support (PBS) approach across Autism Together, in the 6-month period before lockdown we saw a reduction in behaviours of concern in 95% of referrals, a fantastic achievement for everyone.





A FEW OF OUR HIGHLIGHTS

WE HAVE A NEW CEO

As you'll have seen on page 6 of this report, Autism Together has a new Chief Executive Officer. Sue Stubbs stepped into the role in September 2020, replacing Robin Bush who had been with the charity since 2013. Sue joined Autism Together in 2017, when she became the charity's Finance Director.

A qualified accountant, Sue has worked in a variety of senior financial and strategic roles across the private sector, and the arts and charity sectors too, for the likes of Merrill Lynch, British Nuclear Fuels Ltd, Bluecoat and FACT.

Sue says: "I am excited and proud to have the opportunity to lead the organisation through the next phase of its development."

MARKEL 3RD SECTOR CARE AWARDS WIN

A highlight of the year came in December 2019 when Autism Together won a national award at the Markel 3rd Sector Care Awards for a scheme pioneered by ATAS. The ATAS team attended the ceremony in London and were presented with the Community Engagement Award by Esther Rantzen for their work with the Autism Champions Scheme, a training programme created to help make the region's businesses more autism aware when it comes to the needs of both their staff and customers.



PORT SUNLIGHT RIVER PARK HERITAGE CENTRE & CAFÉ OPENED

We chose World Autism Awareness Day 2019 to open our heritage centre and café at Port Sunlight River Park. We manage the 28-hectare site on the banks of the River Mersey on behalf of The Land Trust.

The Mayor of Wirral cut the ribbon in front of 100 guests and visitors. Work on the site's heritage centre began in September 2018 as part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund supported project, Discovering Bromborough 3.

Since then it has become a hub for the people we support, volunteers and community groups, along with the visiting public to enjoy.



LOUISE PARNELL has joined the Senior Leadership Team as Autism Together's new Finance Director, taking over from Sue Stubbs. A qualified accountant, Louise has 11 years' experience in the charity sector, most recently as Executive Director of Business Resources at National Museums Liverpool, and is also a trustee for UK-Med.

SWIMMING POOL REFURBISHMENT

We completed the full refurbishment of our swimming pool and changing rooms on our Raby site last autumn.

Funded by donations worth over £61,000, including £30,000 from Sport England, we invited the Mayor and Mayoress of Wirral to officially open the fully-refurbished facilities at Raby Hall in Bromborough, Wirral.

Along with modernised changing areas, designed to make the people we support feel as comfortable as possible, a sensory suite, generously donated by the Williams Family Foundation, has been installed in the pool area.



TOGETHER AS A TEAM

Working to our values

SUPPORTING PEOPLE EVERY DAY

At Autism Together we work throughout the year to support individuals with autism, helping them to get the most from their lives. We do this through a range of specialist services run by support teams, trained regularly by our award-winning in-house trainers.

In this section we take a look at the successes of our residential and supported living teams over the past 12 months.

RESIDENTIAL

We provide registered residential care to over 100 people in a wide variety of housing, ranging from two-bed houses in the heart of the community, through to larger homes in a pleasant rural setting for those with more complex support needs.

Autism Together offers different living environments that can be scaled up or down to meet the needs and wishes of each person accessing the service. All our residential care is registered with, and inspected by the Care Quality Commission.

It's been an important period within the

Residential service, a time in which work was started on Autism Together's much-anticipated short stay respite service. Working with the architect and builders to make sure the specifications were met, the building work was nearing completion before lockdown and the service started to open its doors in summer 2020.

The team is very excited to have finally got

The Maples open, albeit with a different finish to the model planned before the pandemic arrived. However there is a clear plan in place to develop the service safely and in line with government guidance.

Progress has continued regarding action plans for the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and ensuring the service is building the right support structures. This process is bringing real positives, including a complete review in the way we do some everyday things. For example looking at where bins are stored and what signage is needed in services has started to raise bigger questions around helping people we support truly feel that the place they live is their own home and supporting this as a key principle.





The Residential team has shared in and supported a great deal of success throughout the year, from helping individuals walk into the sea for the first time – a lifelong goal for some – to adapting to the global change driven by coronavirus.

Tremendous success has been enjoyed through ASDAN awards and those we support have celebrated their success and achievements. Individuals within the service have also been supported to take several holidays of note, including Benidorm and Krakow to name just a few. The team takes pride not only in supporting people to achieve, but also to enjoy what the world has to offer them.

The service's team of registered managers has remained stable and this is important when building for the future. Sharing the expertise and knowledge of a team of strong, dedicated managers has made a huge difference to our positive response when Covid-19 struck towards the end of the financial year.

The determination of management to support their services through this pandemic has been superhuman. Similarly heroic has been the work of the staff teams providing direct support, along with the domestic staff working alongside them to make sure the virus wasn't able to take hold.

The direct care staff showed real ingenuity to adapt, supporting individuals to remain safe and happy amid changes to much-loved and needed routines. In the absence of family and friends, staff used technology to bridge the gap and provided opportunities for those they support to connect through photos, letters and videos.

The support received from our office staff to source a particular type of pizza and various other essential supplies when the crisis began showed what wonderful people work right throughout Autism Together. The service and staff could not have managed so well without this vital support from colleagues across the whole organisation working as one, supporting each other to keep everyone safe, both those in their care and one another.

SUPPORTED LIVING

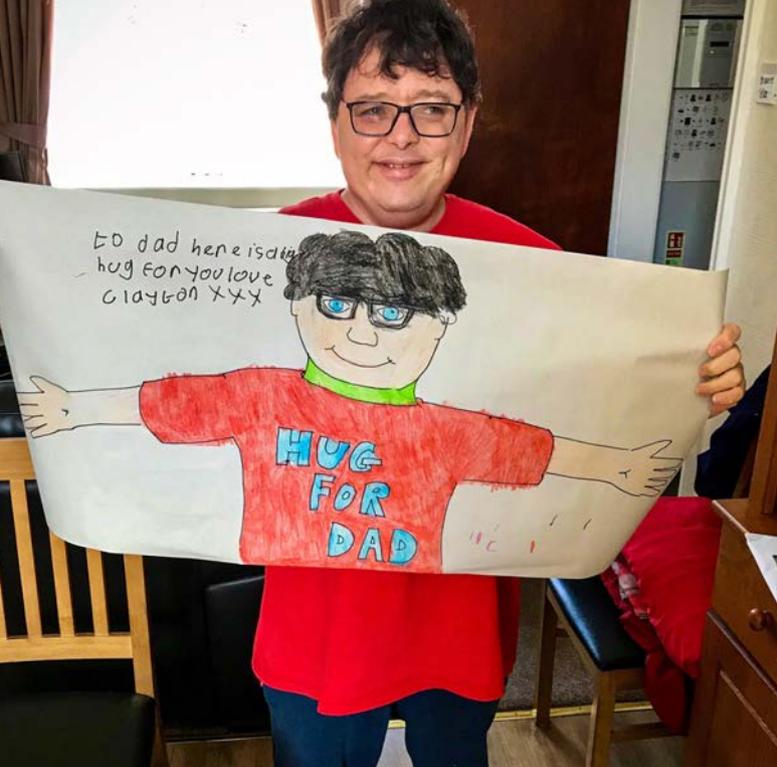
Our Supported Living service provides individualised support in a community setting. Working with registered social landlords, we offer bespoke services in a variety of housing from single flats to shared accommodation.

We have 25 supported living locations across Wirral and West Cheshire. The vast majority are houses and flats within typical residential areas and range from single-occupancy services to shared houses and flat schemes, accommodating up to 7 in some, and even up to 15 in our single-occupancy flat scheme, Weatherstones Court. The service offers everything from shared support through to comprehensive 2-to-1, 24-hour, 7-days-a-week support, allied with the security and experience of a highly-trained staff team.

In the past year, the team has set up a new property in Cheshire and the three young men living there have settled very well. Work is proceeding nicely on a new flat scheme in Oxton which, all being well, will soon be home to 7 individuals, who should be in their own flats by the end of 2020.

This will enable the team to provide a more bespoke support experience, consolidating some existing services which are no longer meeting people's needs and coming in line with CQC expectations that individuals have their own front doors.





recruitment strategies, including offering a range of rota patterns; evening, weekend and online interviews; creating permanent arrangements with agency staff we would like to employ; and planning localised recruitment drives. A combination of these initiatives has helped reduce the service's agency staff usage by 60%.

Six members of the Supported Living management team completed the PBS coaches programme this year, resulting in a number of referrals for Positive Behaviour Support intervention. This has been highly successful in reducing the number of incidents of behaviours of concern and significantly increasing people's quality of life indicators.

The team focused this year on supporting people to enjoy a holiday if they wanted one. A number of individuals enjoyed successful holidays to the likes of Disneyland Paris, Barcelona, Lanzarote, the Christmas markets in London, the Harry Potter Studio Tour, and a trip to the Guinness factory in Ireland to name a few.

Many individuals within the service have been helped to improve their skills. In fact, some have been actively involved in helping to recruit their own support staff by being a part of the interview process, meet and greets, and discussions about the type of person they would like supporting them.

Taking time to thoroughly analyse staffing data has helped create flexible and innovative



SUPPORTING PARENTS AND STAFF

ADMISSIONS

Our Admissions and Referrals Department looks after those coming into our services.

Through person-centred assessments of each individual, the person's support needs, likes and dislikes, accommodation and staffing preferences are recorded to ensure a placement is suitable for them.

Transition plans ensure any person moving into a service will feel comfortable and have a good understanding of what is happening throughout.

The Admissions team continues to receive a high level of referrals each month (approximately 25-30) for all the services it looks after, particularly regarding accommodation.

The referrals have led to a waiting list for accommodation due to the excellent reputation of Autism Together's services in the North West area. The team has continued to work through this as spaces become available.

In addition to the daily referrals for our services and advising people on how to access these, the team has been busy providing information to individuals, parents/carers, and professionals on issues including diagnosis information, benefits, achieving funding and signposting to other relevant services.

While the team has been unable to offer support to those wanting respite with the closure of The Ferns, they anticipate an increase in referrals and admissions for respite once The Maples is fully open. Respite continues to be a popular service requested through

Admissions and the team looks forward to supporting more families and individuals to get the break they need in future.

Along with attending events to showcase the many services our organisation offers, the team has been able to support the Children and Family Service with assessments for its Direct Payment services along with offering outreach support in line with allocated Transforming Care budgets.



ATAS

Our Autism Training and Advisory Service (ATAS) handles all our in-house training and regulates autism-specific practices throughout the organisation, ensuring our autism support is delivered in accordance with the company's mission statement, policies, guidelines and statutory obligations.

Staff receive comprehensive and ongoing training to aid their skills in supporting individuals with autism, including with communication approaches, sensory awareness and interventions, visual structure, environmental recommendations and social skills.

The ATAS team is also involved in the promotion of autism awareness throughout the region, and offers Autism Advice Sessions to adults with a diagnosis of autism or to those who support someone on the spectrum. In January 2020 ATAS introduced a series of evening workshops, focusing on life skills, for parents and people with autism to attend.

The experience has allowed the team to gauge which courses are of most use and interest to people, helping them to streamline the offer in future. Autism Advice Sessions remain in demand, providing a chance for individuals and parents to talk in

a confidential and safe environment. During the Covid-19 pandemic, sessions were able to continue using video or telephone calls. ATAS is currently looking for future sessions to be funded.

CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICE

Our Children and Family Service (CFS) works in Wirral and across the North West with a focus on providing autism-specific services for children, young people and their families, helping them to better understand their autism, and any related social or communication difficulties.

In the past year the team introduced Summer Clubs at Woodchurch Road primary school for young people with autism aged 8-18 years which brought a number of new families to the service. Children and young people continued to enjoy the various activity groups that were provided throughout the year, with monthly autism workshops also introduced.

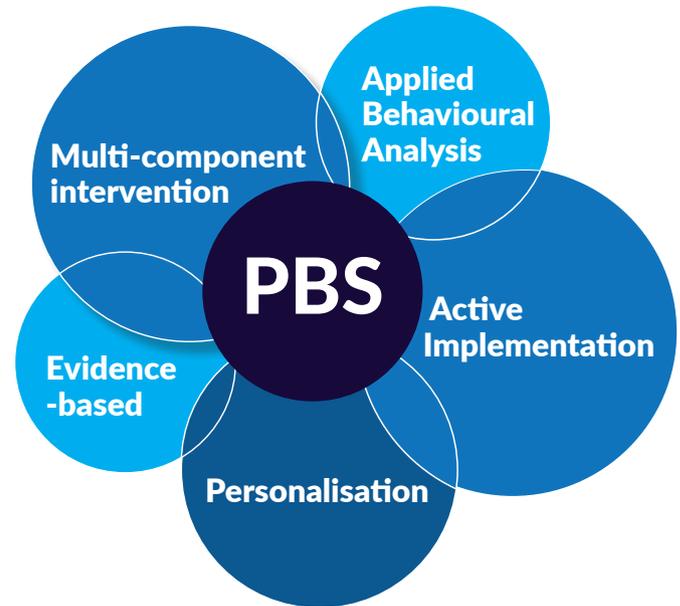
The CFS continues to deliver commissioned support services, with around 250 families accessing these in 2019-20. The CFS works in partnership with two local children's centres to deliver twice-weekly 'Stay & Play' Rainbow sessions to support parents. Around 80 families accessed these sessions during the year.

OUR APPROACH

In the past year we adopted a Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) approach throughout our services. The goal was to focus on proactive and positive strategies to help minimise anxiety triggers and promote early detection of changes in mood and behaviour, ultimately to prevent people we support going into crisis or meltdown.

After recruiting a Clinical PBS lead in 2019, we broadened our PBS coaches' team. PBS coaches complete training with all support staff and manage internal PBS referrals. 30 team members have completed an external PBS Coaches Programme and 3 of these are qualified in functional assessment to assist the team. This has resulted in significant decreases in incidents of behaviours of concern and significant increases in quality of life indicators for those we support.

Across Autism Together, in the 6-months before lockdown we saw a reduction in behaviours of concern in 95% of referrals. We now have a PBS coach in our Admissions team, extending our application of PBS to include the assessment process when people join our services.



IN OTHER NEWS...

- Mental health and autism training were introduced at the beginning of the year for all staff to attend. Michelle Walklett, Yvonne Smith, and Dawn Kirby have all undertaken training to be in-house 'Mental Health First Aiders'.
- During lockdown, new starters were able to attend a two-day induction course in a safe, socially-distanced environment. They then used eLearning and virtual training to ensure they had the required knowledge and skills to support people with autism as they joined our services.



DEVELOPING SKILLS

CREATIVE ARTS & TECHNOLOGY

The Creative Arts team held a number of successful exhibitions this year, including at Earlston Library in Wallasey for World Autism Awareness Day. All the pictures on display were created from torn paper by the talented people we support.

This was followed by a fantastic summer exhibition at Liverpool's Metropolitan Cathedral. Thousands of people saw the work on display and the comments book was filled with messages of praise, encouragement and hope both from family members of our artists and people visiting from across the globe. Examples included: 'These pictures made my heart sing! Wonderful colours, techniques and images', 'Stunning work, great inspiration and motivation for us with our son', 'Excellent artwork – we should have more of this around the city.'

The exhibition also attracted the attention of ITV News with Granada Reports' reporter Andy Bonner visiting to film a piece about the amazing work the department does supporting our artists at Gallagher House.

Friendship Group sessions within the IT rooms continue to grow, with lots of the people we support playing games that encourage communication, turn taking, discussion, and exploring ideas and emotions. The department also launched its own comic this year called Peanut Corner. It showcases the creative ideas and talents

of those we support in our Media sessions.

This coincided with another exhibition the team put on at The Light Cinema in New Brighton called 'Forced Perspectives' where our artists photographed their favourite Lego superheroes in front of their favourite Liverpool and Wirral landmarks.

October saw the team say farewell and good luck to Terry Usher, our head of CVS, as he left the organisation to move to pastures new. Terry was one of the few people remaining within the organisation to have been there for more than twenty years and has seen how much the department and the organisation has grown and developed in this time. His leaving celebration was held at Raby Gardens and was an emotional day for both staff and the people we support.



PERFORMING ARTS

In a fun-filled year for the department, sessions in Giles Shirley Hall continued to cater for a large number of supported individuals and provide a very interactive, fun, person-centred environment.

New activities are introduced on a regular basis as we continue to innovate autism-specific performing arts activities. A huge new smart touchscreen TV has been installed and is used to inspire and entertain on a daily basis.

Participants in one of our smaller groups have benefited from the varied activities on offer



including music, dance and drama, film-making and even radio recording sessions. Yes, Autism Together now has its own radio show, Together FM which features a dedicated team of people we support who meet to host a music quiz, talk about news and tell jokes. This is recorded, then released on Soundcloud and shared through social media. The group host the show themselves and take it in turns to be the presenter. To date they have released 7 shows, including a Christmas special.

Music sessions in the church continue to be a popular activity. New equipment including a touchscreen TV and electronic drum kit continue to be put to good use on a daily basis. Several

guitars were also kindly donated from the Children and Family Service.

Groups meeting at Price's Club in Bromborough Pool Village continue to enjoy an incredibly wide range of activities, including the choir, music technology, drumming, and meditation groups.

The Drama Forum has worked really hard this year, producing a fantastic original play 'Wizards of the Caribbean' for their Christmas performance in Price's Club. The performance was filmed and some sections shared as part of Autism Together's Virtual Summer Fun Day. The Dynamics dance group continued to develop new routines throughout the year. Highlights include their performances at the 2019 Christmas show.

Our resident film makers continued to impress with their epic tales. Highlights included the premiere of their movie 'The Quest For The Holy Grail' which had a full premiere and is available to watch on YouTube.

The group also showed their Christmas film 'Halloween vs Christmas' and have completed their silent movie 'The Hush', yet to be premiered, while also making great progress on a monster movie based around the Chinese Zodiac.

Autism Together's house band, The Beathovens, have continued to write and perform their own material across the North West and have begun to record their debut album. Performances included the SEND event at St George's Hall in Liverpool, Ty Mawr Country Park in Wrexham, and at the River Park's 5th birthday party.

COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Our Community Health and Wellbeing department consists of four Community groups: a gym group, a pool group, a narrowboat group and a trampolining group. The team provide a wide range of activities to the people we support and this year have aimed to highlight the variety of different opportunities available to them.

A self-advocacy group, CommunicATe, has been introduced to give the people we support more input and interaction into how the charity works. The CommunicATe group has participated in a few projects around the various award schemes Autism Together offers, along with the creation of a narrowboat safety video, and meeting with external advocacy groups. They were even involved in the interview process for new Autism Together staff, including for the position of CEO.

The swimming pool and changing room area underwent a much-needed refurbishment, with sensory equipment installed in the pool area prior to an official opening and visit from the Mayor of Wirral.

The swimming groups have started to work towards their Rock Hopper Swimming Awards after the team introduced a small trial group for those who showed interest in the activity. The lifeguards have also participated in their annual refresher.

There has been lots to celebrate, from a Gateway awards presentation held at the River Park, joining the other service areas, to

celebrating the achievements of the outgoing Head of CVS, Terry Usher. There was also a World Autism Awareness trip to Chester on board the Raby Enterprise, Autism Together's own narrowboat, along with securing funding for new equipment and essential training.

The training saw three individuals gain their D1 driving licence, which will help people more safely access the community. Over the year, the department has purchased a new water rower, a cross trainer and a range of adaptable bikes for the gym. There were a number of community visits too, with a trip to Liverpool FC's Anfield stadium to see the European Cup on display being a highlight for some of the people we support.





HORTICULTURE

The Horticulture Team has been hard at work, completely renovating the bottom area of Raby Kitchen Garden. The team removed all the weeds growing there then covered most of the area with matting and topped this with wood chipping.

Wigwams have been placed to help the growing of beans and peas, while fruit bushes have been replanted and there is now a path winding between them. Wildflower meadows have been sown for people to enjoy. Going forward the team will be installing a tyre seating area, a pergola for sheltered seating, plus a water feature.

The personal bed area has been extended with 20 extra beds created so the people we support can grow their own plants and vegetables.

...AND THE ANIMALS

We have a wide range of animals living across our Raby Gardens and Woodlands areas, all overseen by our animal husbandry team, who welcomed some new arrivals in the past 12 months.

Along with two new activity leaders, Lorraine Taylor and Nathan Peters, Raby Gardens became the new home of four South American alpacas. After a short settling in period, handsome male Inca, the leader of the group, and his three female companions, Ali, Jennie and Davina, are happily enjoying their home. These calm, gentle and intelligent animals are helping the people we support overcome any fears and it has been a pleasure to watch those we support confidently approach and interact with the animals.

A larger project that has been completed this year is the outdoor rabbit run. Along with being a great area for our furry friends to play, it is also a sensory area for people we support to sit and enjoy watching the animals run about. During the revamp of the current outdoor rabbit area, the people we support did an amazing job upcycling old hutches.

Our pigs have enjoyed renovations to their houses along with a new flagged area for them to feed from during winter. Some smaller furry friends arrived too... a pair of guinea pigs and a rabbit called Peter.

Bromborough Pool Garden Centre also welcomed some animals this year - two new hens. The birds were nervous at first, but thanks to the gentle kindness of the people we support they have become very confident and quite cheeky.



**WORKING WITH
THE COMMUNITY**

At Autism Together we have strong bonds with the communities we operate within.

We encourage the people we support to explore their local area, to enjoy its parks, canals, coast, its attractions, shops and eateries. We also maintain strong links with the community through a number of social enterprises which we encourage people we support who access our day services to get involved in. This challenge encourages individuals to interact with members of the public, while learning useful life and work skills.

our
values



**WE PROMOTE POSITIVE
COMMUNICATION**



BROMBOROUGH POOL GARDEN CENTRE

Right at the heart of Bromborough Pool Village we continue to run our own garden centre. People we support volunteer there, getting the chance to help grow and maintain the plants that are sold to customers. In the last year, our volunteer group has helped keep the garden centre grounds tidy and flourishing. Most time was spent planting baby plug plants, designing and making up hanging baskets, planting seeds and taking cuttings. In the last year we installed personal beds for our volunteers to grow their own vegetables, harvesting and enjoying the delicious produce in the autumn.

The Garden Centre's own Cherry Blossom Café has grown its customer base in the last 12 months and, with the help of social media, more and more people heard about and tried it. Along with increasing the number of customers coming to the café, the team

has spent the last year considerably building the skills of the people we support. Staff have been expanding the tasks individuals are able to complete either within the café itself or in the running of it. In particular, by creating a new activity area, the people we support have a space where they can make fresh soup to sell in the café, prepare sandwiches for afternoon teas or look after other catering requests. It's a great opportunity for the group to practise the skills needed to work in the café itself and allows them to build their confidence before transferring those skills when they are ready. Indeed, a number of those we support at the garden centre have gained multiple ASDAN awards this year.

The group were really pleased to get a canteen area of their own recently, a place to enjoy breaktimes and relax before continuing their hard work. The Garden Centre had a really successful winter season, selling all of its Christmas tree stock and nearly all

its wreaths. This hard work was rewarded with a fantastic party, with food, games and Christmas movies to enjoy. The garden centre and cafe had to close during lockdown and our volunteers and staff are hard at work maintaining the place, looking after the flowers and getting everything ready to reopen as soon as we can.

PORT SUNLIGHT RIVER PARK

Autism Together manages a 28-hectare park on the Wirral-side banks of the River Mersey, on behalf of The Land Trust. Over the last year our staff there have been busy keeping the River Park safe and tidy for visitors, while looking after the abundant wildlife onsite.

A new Heritage Centre building was officially opened on World Autism Day in 2019. The launch event saw the Wirral Mayor and champion boxer Callum Smith join locals, volunteers, staff and family members to celebrate the achievement. The building is a big improvement on the old Ranger Cabin and includes a small café area, which has become a real community asset.

It also gives a base for people we support to enjoy work experience placements at the River Park. Along with maintenance work around the park, they have enjoyed working in the café, serving drinks, managing money and greeting the public. The visitor book is full of compliments about the friendly atmosphere and excellent service. In autumn we saw a new Park Ranger, Andrew Jennings-Giles, take over the reins. Andrew is a former UK Wildlife Specialist at Chester Zoo, and

he was joined later in the year by new Community Education Officer, Ian Jones.

FUNDRAISING

The money raised through fundraising provides additional services, facilities and equipment for Autism Together, which improves the lives of the people we support and greatly assists the staff who work with them.

The Fundraising department has been busy over the past year encouraging donations, gifts and legacies in wills, applying to Trusts and Foundations, running events and even starting a lottery. This year the team continued to grow its annual events such as the Summer Fun Day and Christmas Fayre, seeing an increase in attendees to both. Less funding was received from trusts and foundations, but there was an increase in the amount raised through merchandise sales.

During lockdown the Fundraising team worked hard to help secure vital donations of food and other supplies from the generous local community.



CASE STUDY

SUPPORTING THOMAS

Earlier this year, Autism Together went to meet a young man, Thomas, who was being considered for a placement within the organisation's Community & Vocational Services.

Tom hadn't left home without his mum or nan since leaving school, due to his social anxiety. He was offered a two-day placement within our Health & Wellbeing area, with the team looking at Tom's needs and placing him with a group matching his interests.

Service manager Kevin Mulligan managed Tom's placement, with a view to helping him establish new friends and experience activities he enjoyed, in the hope it would ease his anxiety and help him find a purpose in life.

On his first day with Autism Together, Kevin met with Tom and introduced him to his group and group leader. This was a huge step for Tom, but once he was inside the building and was reassured by our staff he soon settled.

The placement has been very successful, not only for Tom but for his family too. Tom's mum commented in his sixth-month review how much more confident and happy he was in himself.



Having followed the skills pathway created for Tom, staff have noticed a vast improvement in his ability to cope with change and new environments. Evaluations from Tom's activity manager have outlined a noticeable lowering of his anxiety, coupled with him forming new friendships within the group.

It is part of our ethos to ensure a person-centred approach and this seems to have genuinely worked with Tom. His mum recently contacted us to share her joy in seeing him take a first taxi ride on his own. Seeing this change in a young man, who now has the confidence to interact with the world and openly share his concerns with staff, is so pleasing to everyone who supports him.



TOM'S MUM SAID:

"After Tom left school he spent three years very isolated, suffering from severe anxiety, depression and many more issues.

"Our world opened up when I contacted Autism Together. The mentors have helped and supported Tom throughout his time here.

"If not for these amazing people that care so much about his wellbeing, I honestly do not know where he would be right now.

"He is growing in confidence and looking forward to what his future holds."



FINANCIAL REVIEW

Income

The organisation's income increased 4.6% compared to the previous year, from £21,857k to £22,868k.

Income in all service areas has improved with the exception of respite and social enterprises. The former has been closed for part of the year. We continue to put pressure on local authorities to pay fees that reflect the full cost of providing services.

CVS continues to perform well due to increasing demand and continuing work with commissioners on fee uplifts, contributing to an increase in fees of over 12% against last year.

Fee increases and the opening of a new service have driven an 8% increase in fees in Supported Living.

Expenditure

In line with the increase in fees, total expenditure increased by 5.8% from £21,873k to £23,139k.

This amount includes actuarially assessed cost for the defined benefit pension scheme, which increased by £448k this year, mostly due to the impact of the McCloud legal case, which is a one-off event. Employment costs represent over 80% of our income and have increased 7% against last year. The increase was largely due to the cost of living and National Living Wage salary increases awarded during the year, together with

the increased services delivered and the additional cost for the defined benefit scheme mentioned above.

Other costs have remained in line with last year at £4,095k compared to £4,100k in 2018/19.

Capital Expenditure

This year we spent £648k (2018: £143k) on property improvements and equipment, reflecting the respite and pool improvements.

Cash Flow

An overview of the cash movements during the year are given in the statement on page 22 of the full audited accounts. After adjusting for non-cash items, such as movements on the pension deficit and depreciation, operations during the year generated positive cash flow of £931k, (2019: £834k). The other major contributors to cash outflow in the year has been investment in property and facilities of £648k (2019: £143k) and net cash used in financing activities of £256k (2019: £164k).

Future issues

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the delivery of day services had been significantly affected. To date we have worked closely with local authority commissioners and our finances

remain healthy. There remains a risk that as day services return to a socially-distanced model, with lower capacity and increased support ratios, local authorities will want to review their funding support and we are planning for that possibility. There is also a risk of a second spike relating to Covid and we have contingency plans to manage this both operationally and financially.

The announcement of the new National Living Wage from April 2016 and the subsequent increases in 2020 continue to have a major impact on Autism Together going forward. The increase to £8.21 per hour in April 2019 yet again had knock-on effects in terms of the need to lift the pay of staff that were previously paid at or just above this rate. This, and the need to attract and retain staff, resulted in a review of salary levels with a 2% pay increase awarded in July 2019. This opportunity to increase pay rates is, of course, welcome, but it will only be sustainable if local authority social services departments are funded adequately.

We will continue to work with our local authority commissioners to negotiate fees for the existing people we support, ensuring full cost recovery. This is a long and slow process, but has resulted in some success and enabled Autism Together to continue to provide services for all those we currently support. This process will need to be repeated again each year as the Living Wage increases.

Pension Liability

The charity participates in the Merseyside Pension

Fund, a defined benefit scheme, as an admitted body. The scheme is managed in accordance with the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 2013. Access to this scheme by new Autism Together employees ended with effect from 4 April 2011. In accordance with FRS102 reporting requirements, our pension scheme reported a deficit of £1,165k at 31 March 2020. This compared with a deficit of £2,009k at the previous year-end. The main reason for the reduction in deficit has been as a result of changes in assumptions that are used in the calculations.

Full details of the FRS102 pension valuation and assumptions used are given in note 24 to the full accounts. The trustees are mindful of the exposure of the organisation to fluctuations in the valuation of the pension fund and are in discussions with the Fund about ways in which the exposure of the company to variations in valuation could be reduced in future.

Since the closure of the opportunity to participate in the Merseyside Pension Fund, new staff members have been able to join a money purchase pension scheme, where there is no recourse to the assets of the organisation. Since 1 November 2013, Autism Together has become subject to the regulations surrounding Automatic Enrolment and is using the National Employment Savings Trust for this purpose.

Investment powers and policy

Under the Articles of Association, the charity has

the power to invest in any way the trustees think fit. Cash that is not immediately needed for day to day expenditure or is being held for a future project is invested prudently in interest earning deposits with approved Bank of England UK institutions.

Reserves Policy

The trustees reviewed the reserves policy in 2020. This aims to have general reserves of £1.5m of which £600,000 is to be held in cash with the remaining £900,000 held to cover regular day-to-day working capital. The £600,000 cash reserve would be held to fund unforeseen incidents and initial start-up costs for the development of new services which help the organisation further its work for the benefit of people with autism.

In setting this level of reserve, the trustees have considered the risks around income streams, the continuing need to fund the pension schemes, the ongoing maintenance of properties, and the extent to which risks can be covered by insurance or have been provided for in the annual budget.

Free reserves are defined as unrestricted funds, excluding amounts held in the form of fixed assets, loans to purchase those assets and the pension deficit. As at 31 March 2020 free reserves were £1,499k compared to £771k at 31 March 2019. The proportion of this held in cash has improved with better control over outstanding debtors.

The designated fund for the respite extension was released in the year against expenditure incurred. This is towards the cost of refurbishing Helen House, renamed 'The Maples', which houses our

Respite unit and which opened in July 2020.

To mark our 50th anniversary in 2018 we launched our Future 50 appeal during the year to fundraise for an Assessment and Diagnostic Centre on the site of our original building, Old Raby Hall. We have stopped this because the Care Quality Commission, the body that regulates our services, are unlikely to register services with more than six beds (our proposed inpatient unit had 12 beds) or in campus-style settings such as our Raby site. The fund has a balance of £319k at 31 March 20 (2019 £309k).

We have written to all donors, and provided an update on our website, to communicate the change in plans and to give donors options regarding their donation. We are developing a range of other projects that will directly benefit the people we support. Finally, we hold Restricted Funds which have been donated for specific projects, details of which are given in note 19 to the accounts.

In addition to the funds designated to a particular project, the trustees hold a designated fund representing fixed assets, less any specific funding for that purpose. This reflects the fact that these funds cannot be readily used for any other purpose. At 31 March 2020 this fixed asset fund amounted to £3,711k (2019 - £3,825k).

Details of designated funds and of restricted funds may be found in note 19 to the accounts. The pension fund deficit of £1,165k is calculated in accordance with FRS102 and is excluded from the calculation of free reserves, as this amount is not a current liability but will be paid through future earnings.



Staff expenditure

2020 £19.044m

2019 £17.676m

EXPENDITURE

	2020 £'000	2019 £'000
Total staff costs	19,044	17,773
Other expenditure	4,095	4,100
Total	23,139	21,873
Capital expenditure	648	143

CASH FLOWS

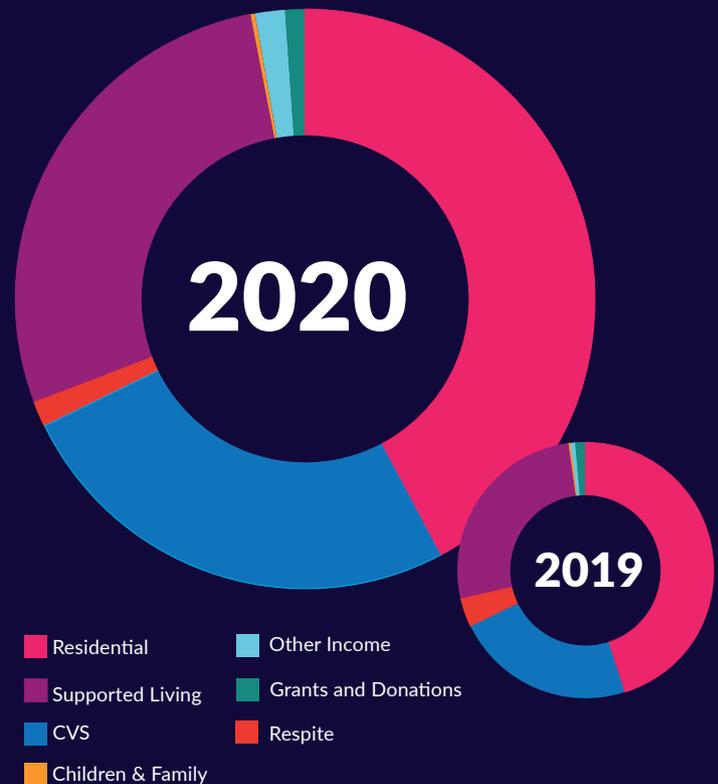
Net cash from operating activities	931	834
Net cash used in investing activities	(648)	(143)
Net cash used in financing activities	283	691
Net increase in cash and cash equivalents	256	(164)
Cash and cash equivalents at 1st April 2017	539	527
Cash and cash equivalents at 31st March 2018	848	321
	1,387	848

FUNDS

General funds	1,499	771
Restricted funds	16	7
Fixed asset fund	3,711	3,825
Other designated funds	319	430
Pension (deficit) surplus	(1,165)	(2,009)
Total funds	4,380	3,024

INCOME

	2020 £'000	2019 £'000
Residential	9,685	9,161
CVS	5,842	5,296
Respite	332	758
Supported Living	6,326	5,803
Children & Family	77	72
Other income	380	414
Grants & donations	226	353
Total	22,868	21,857



Full audited accounts and financial statements will be filed with the Charity Commission and Companies House. Copies may be obtained from the Registered Office, Oak House, 6 Tebay Road, Bromborough, CH62 3PA

PATRONS, TRUSTEES & SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM

PATRONS:

Mrs Trish Chapman
Dr John Kennedy
CBE, KSG, KMCO, DL

TRUSTEES:

Catherine Ames
(Chair)
Edward Behan
(Vice Chair)
Carole Battersby
Iain Cadman
John Callcott
Anthony Cragg
Andrew Davies
David Evans
Murray Freeman
John Kennedy
Helen Winrow

Company Secretary
Iain Cadman

SENIOR

LEADERSHIP TEAM:

Chief Executive
Sue Stubbs

Deputy CEO &
Operations
Jane Carolan

HR & Organisational
Development
Jim Strain

Finance
Louise Parnell

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📘 AutismtogetherUK

Reg. Charity Number: 1007878 Reg. Company Number: 2658268

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We would like to say a big thank you to all our supporters, friends and family, and the following organisations that have supported us this year: Co Op Community Fund, Groundwork, Birkenhead Soroptimists, TSB Bootle and Lord Street, National Lottery, RNHA Digital Social Care, Amelia Chadwick Trust, West Wallasey Van Hire, Stagecoach, Birkenhead School, Duchy of Lancaster Benevolent Fund, Children in Need and Medicash.