

Autscape

Annual Report

August 2009-August 2010

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Introduction

Autescape was created by autistic people with the aim of providing an autistic-oriented environment. At Autescape, autistic people are fully included without having to adjust to the expectations of normal society. Presentations do not focus on how autistic people must be fundamentally changed in order to be acceptable. Autescape is a forum for autistic people to meet others, and an opportunity to experience a positive and accepting environment.

Autescape has been running since 2004, with our first conference in July 2005. Each annual conference has been attended by between 50 and 80 participants and there is always a high demand for the available places. Presentations focus on autistic people's needs and interests and in the past have included such topics as self-advocacy organisations, loneliness, accessing support, autistic identity, relationships, conversation skills, inertia, anxiety, social interaction, police awareness of autism, diet and family life. Leisure and social activities have also been an essential part of Autescape and these have included Shintaido (from 2005-2007), a luminarium (in 2008), meditation, films with an autistic theme, lively discussions (both structured and informal), a music group, art workshops, jewellery making, a very popular informal rounds singing group and entertainment evenings with a variety of contributions from participants.

Objectives

As stated in our constitution, Autescape's objectives are to:

- Organize an annual retreat style conference in the UK for autistic people and their supporters.
- Facilitate the widest possible access to the conference
- Promote support and self-advocacy for autistic people, organized by autistic people and their supporters.

Over the past year, a diverse, engaged and autistic-majority management committee has helped Autescape to continue to advance each of those objectives. Most importantly, we have succeeded in mounting this year's Autescape conference.

Organisational structure

Autescape is a small voluntary organisation which is about to become a charitable company. We are very much smaller than many charitable companies; however, on the basis of legal advice, the committee believes that this is the best structure for Autescape's future. The main reason for this is that Autescape enters into a substantial contract each year with the conference venue. This commitment, which is essential to fulfilling our primary purpose, involves a level of financial risk disproportionate to our size. Becoming a company limited by guarantee will protect Autescape's members from the risk of substantial personal liability. Autescape has always been non-profit making and the committee and membership have clearly indicated their wishes for Autescape to become a registered charity. This will also have significant financial benefits as it will enable Autescape to take advantage of the tax relief available to charities.

The first step in creating this new organisation is to incorporate (become a company). This has very recently been achieved. During this year we have also drafted, with detailed guidance from our solicitor, new governing documents (Memorandum and Articles of Association) which have been agreed by the committee and will be submitted to the Charity Commission shortly, along with other required documents such as CRB checks on proposed trustees (committee members). The Charity Commission will then examine Autescape's governing documents and, once their contents are agreed, grant registered charity status.

The new organisation will continue to be run by an elected committee. However, committee members will be known as Directors and the committee will be renamed the Board, in line with Autescape's new

status as a charitable company. The Board of Directors is expected to remain a similar size to the existing management committee.

This year

Autscape has necessarily shifted venues several times. Each time we have aimed to meet the needs of as many participants as possible (accessibility, single rooms, facilities etc.) and placed a high priority on keeping the Autscape fees as low as possible to make Autscape accessible to people on low incomes. This year we have returned to Ammerdown, near Bath. The centre kindly offered Autscape particularly favourable terms which have allowed us to access this otherwise relatively expensive venue. Nevertheless, Ammerdown remains an expensive option and venue fees required an increase of 10-20% in Autscape's residential fees for the full three-day conference. Autscape remains extraordinarily good value for money. Demand for residential places was extremely high this year at a very early stage. After much careful work by the registrar and others, we were in the end able to offer places to the vast majority of those who wished to attend, with a higher number of non-residential participants than in the past. Unfortunately, this was partially due to an unusually high number of late cancellations.

This year's theme has been 'Autistic Wellbeing' and the conference has taken place from the 10th to the 13th of August. It is particularly encouraging that over 40% of participants attended Autscape for the first time this year. This means that the unique opportunity provided by Autscape has now touched the lives of at least 190 autistic people.

The conference has had engaging and relevant presentations, with many first time presenters. A majority of presenters were autistic, although we have also had presentations from a number of non-autistic people – particularly some academics – allowing us to influence the future direction of autism research. Inspired by the theme of Wellbeing, we have had presentations on stress, music, sensory integration, the involvement of autistics in service provision, e-health systems, autism-friendly strategies for coping with eating disorders, autistics at university, and the use of meditation and/or CBT in managing anxiety. Presentations were accepted on a competitive basis out of a range of proposals. Integrated with the formal programme were many opportunities for discussions. Some of these built on the presentation topics, while others were organised by participants around themes of interest (e.g. spirituality, producing an Autscape newsletter). This year's leisure activities have been particularly varied and have included singing rounds, Interlingua, circus skills, mandala drawing, a music group, writing and art activities and 'sparklies in the dark' – an outdoor session watching a meteor shower and playing with various light-emitting devices. These have supplemented the informal socialising which is an important part of the Autscape programme for many.

During the year the committee has been busy behind the scenes. The most substantial achievement of the year has been the drafting of the new governing documents. The constitution subcommittee has worked in detail through every aspect of our new governing documents, with support from our solicitor, to ensure that they will meet Autscape's particular needs both now and in the longer term. We have reviewed and taken steps to considerably improve our accounting procedures in the run up to becoming a charitable company. We have also rewritten the job descriptions for committee posts to reflect the organisational changes Autscape is undergoing. The committee is also committed to further documenting Autscape's corporate knowledge (i.e. its history and the processes of running Autscape) in an effort to reduce Autscape's dependency on particular individuals.

We have also researched potential future venues for Autscape. The high demand for places this year has led us to consider venues able to accommodate higher numbers of people, although we remain aware of the importance of retaining Autscape's unique atmosphere.

During this year the committee has been largely stable but there have been two departures: Robin and Kabie. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their contribution to Autscape.

Formal monthly committee meetings have taken place (online). These have been open to observation by Autscape members and the minutes have been made available on the website. Additionally, the

committee maintains an email list for day to day communication. The work of subcommittees continues to develop and many have successfully completed substantial tasks. It remains challenging to engage sufficient people in carrying out tasks for Autscope. Subcommittees are fulfilling a useful role in this regard, but it remains the case that a small number of main committee members shoulder virtually all responsibilities.

The People Involved in Organising Autscope 2010 (August 2009-August 2010)

Chair: Kalen

Secretary: Yo

Treasurer: Debbie Finucane (Aug – Oct '09), Kabie (Oct '09 – Mar '10), Peter Benie (Mar – Aug '10)

General committee members:

Kabie (Aug '09 – Oct '09)

Robin May (Aug '09 – Jan '10)

Martijn Dekker (Aug '09 – Aug '10) (Programme co-ordinator)

Peter Benie (Aug '09 - Mar '10) (Venue co-ordinator)

Debbie Finucane (Oct '09 - Aug '10) (Registrar)

Trish Jubb (Aug '09 - Aug '10)

The Future

Autscope is moving forward rapidly. It is now clear that we will complete charity registration early in the new Autscope year (August 2010 – August 2011). We hope to consolidate this progress over the next year and put in place sustainable systems to achieve the regulatory requirements which come with Autscope's new status. Autscope's new accounting procedures will support our prudent financial management and ensure the committee has good access to the information needed to make decisions in the interests of Autscope's long term sustainability. Over the next year we will also be reviewing our wider governance policies covering, for example, elections to the management committee. We also hope to use our imminent charitable status to re-energise fundraising efforts.

Take up of membership this year was lower than the committee would like to see. We intend to remedy this by ensuring greater benefits to membership such as introducing a member's discount on the Autscope conference. In addition, a new working group will be developing a member's newsletter. The committee will also be working hard on finding financially sustainable options for an Autscope venue which would also provide us with greater flexibility if demand for places continues to grow.

The Autscope Management Committee