

Autscape (an unincorporated members' association)

Final Annual Report

August 2010-May 2011

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Introduction

Autscape was created by autistic people with the aim of providing an autistic-oriented environment. At Autscape, 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. Autscape is a forum for autistic people to meet others, and an opportunity to experience a positive and accepting environment.

Autscape has been running since 2004, with our first conference in July 2005. Each annual conference has been attended by between 50 and 85 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 varied topics as self-advocacy organisations, loneliness, accessing support, autistic identity, relationships, conversation skills, inertia, anxiety, social interaction, police awareness of autism, diet, family life, sensory integration, stress, eating disorders and music. Leisure and social activities have also been an essential part of Autscape and these have included Shintaido (from 2005-2007), a luminarium (in 2008), photography, meditation, films with an autistic theme, lively discussions (both structured and informal), various music groups, art workshops, jewellery making, swimming, table tennis, a very popular informal rounds singing group, mandala drawing, an entertainment evening with a variety of contributions from participants and 'sparklies in the dark' (an informal mutual sensory experience).

Organisational structure

In 2008, the members decided that Autscape should become a charitable company. The Autscape Organisation became a company in July 2010 and registered as a charity in May 2011. At the 2010 AGM, Autscape's members agreed that Autscape (the unincorporated members' association) should be dissolved as soon as the new organisation became a registered charity. In accordance with that decision, The Management Committee of Autscape dissolved the organisation on 13th May 2011 and transferred its assets to The Autscape Organisation (a charitable company limited by guarantee). This is, therefore, the final annual report of the old organisation. The first annual report of The Autscape Organisation will be available later this year.

Objectives

As stated in the constitution, Autscape's objectives were 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 seven years of its existence, Autscape has successfully advanced these objects. The Autscape conference has been held in the summer in each of these years. Autscape has become more widely known, garnering several mentions in the press both in the UK and abroad. Each year, new people have attended and benefited from Autscape, in addition to the many people for whom Autscape has become a much anticipated regular event in their calendar. Throughout, Autscape has been autistic-led and has provided unique and much valued support to autistic people. In addition to the peer support experienced by Autscape participants and the many presentations which have spread information about support and self-advocacy, Autscape has been a valuable catalyst. Several autistic-led self-advocacy organisations have been founded in the UK during this period, some by individuals who initially met at Autscape.

This year

Much of the work towards the Autscope conference 2011 was undertaken prior to the dissolution of the old organisation. So information about this year's conference will be included both in this report and in the first annual report of the new organisation.

Autscope 2011 is taking place in a venue new to us, Ackworth School in Pontefract, West Yorkshire. The committee chose this venue as a value-for-money option which also meets the needs of the majority of our participants (approx. 55% of whom are on particularly low incomes). We have been able to maintain fees at a level roughly equivalent to 2010 (when changes to payments for single rooms are taken into account). Autscope remains extraordinarily good value for money. The larger capacity of this venue will allow 80 residential participants to attend this year without undue crowding, and with some spare capacity. The venue chosen poses some physical accessibility issues due to the listed buildings. The committee considered this issue carefully before choosing this venue. The accessibility needs of potential autistic participants are varied and the disability-related needs of some groups are sometimes not compatible with the needs of other groups (particularly financial accessibility often conflicts with physical accessibility). The committee tries to balance these needs over the long term by trying to ensure that Autscope is accessible to all groups in, at least, some years. Overall, the committee believes that Autscope is accessible to as broad group of autistic people as was possible to achieve this year.

This year's theme is 'Owning Autism'. Autism Spectrum Conditions (including Aspergers Syndrome) can be officially diagnosed by clinicians. They are examined, thought about, and commented on by academic researchers, journalists and parents. These people contribute to defining what autism means in society. However, autism is experienced from the inside by autistic people. Autscope 2011 will examine who currently "owns" autism and how ownership is expressed and invite consideration of the ways autistic people own our condition.

The conference will take place from the 22nd to the 25th of August. Around one-third of participants will be attending Autscope for the first time. This means that the unique opportunity provided by Autscope has now touched the lives of at least 215 autistic people.

The conference programme includes engaging and relevant presentations, with a substantial majority of autistic presenters, some new to Autscope. Inspired by the theme of Owning Autism, we will have presentations on psychological models of autism; owning autism research; Specialisterne Scotland; owning our support; owning the languages of autism; pitfalls in diagnosis and support; and how autism has been 'owned' and how to claim it. Presentations were accepted on a competitive basis out of a range of proposals. This year, for the first time, we will also have a panel discussion on the theme of the conference. Integrated with the formal programme are many opportunities for discussions. Some of these will build on the presentation topics, while others will be organised by participants around themes of interest, such as education and mutual support. This year's leisure activities are expected to include singing rounds, storytelling, mandala drawing, table tennis, music groups, art activities, a walk with photography, swimming, (weather permitting) 'sparklies in the dark' – an outdoor session watching a meteor shower and playing with various light-emitting devices and the, now traditional, entertainment evening, in which many participants share their talents. These will supplement the informal socialising which continues to be an important part of the Autscope programme for many.

This has been a particularly busy year for the committee. Autscope's conversion to a charitable company has involved carrying out checks on all prospective directors; ensuring that the way Autscope is run conforms to our new governing document and company and charity law; writing bye-laws; setting up systems to make sure all the necessary paperwork is filed on time with Companies House and the Charity Commission; appointing independent examiners to look at Autscope's accounts; changes to our website and documents to reflect our new status (charity and company numbers; new terminology e.g. board instead of committee); accessing training for the company secretary (and vice) and more generally for

the board; and further documenting of Autscope's corporate knowledge through the publication of policies and the creation of internal documents in an effort to reduce Autscope's dependency on particular individuals. Autscope is particularly grateful to Peter Korn of Interface Legal Advisory Service for his patient and tailored support throughout the process of our conversion.

We have also researched potential future venues for Autscope (thanks are particularly due to Debbie Finucane) and have already booked the venue for next year. Next year's Autscope will be held from 23-26 July 2012 at Belsey Bridge Conference Centre, East Anglia.

Other firsts this year include the provision of a youth/alternative programme; the initial issue of an Autscope newsletter for members; arranging lifeguards to allow the inclusion of swimming (in an indoor, heated pool!) as a leisure activity; and making arrangements for participants to visit the showrooms of a nearby supplier of sensory equipment. It is also notable that changes to the registration system and fee structure have led to a higher take up of membership amongst participants registering to attend Autscope this year (around 80% compared to 55% last year).

During this year the committee (now the board) has been very stable. Peter Benie, Stephen Miller and Katja Gottschewski were co-opted early on in the year and, since then, the board has remained stable throughout the year. Formal monthly committee meetings have taken place (online). These have been open to observation by Autscope 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 some have successfully completed substantial tasks. It remains challenging to engage sufficient people in carrying out tasks for Autscope. The subcommittees are gradually taking on a broader range of responsibilities, but it remains the case that it is often the subcommittee chairs (who are generally main committee members) who actually carry through most tasks to completion. There have, however, been some notable roles taken on by some non-board members this year.

*The People Involved in Organising Autscope 2011 (August 2010-May 2011)*¹

The main committee

Chair: (Aug '10 – Mar '11) Vacant (Mar '11 – May '11) Kalen

Secretary: Yo (Aug '10 – May '11)

Treasurer: Peter Benie (Aug '10 – May '11) (and webmaster)

General committee members:

Kalen (Aug '10 – May '11) (Venue coordinator)

Martijn Dekker (Aug '10 – May '11) (Publicity and publications subcommittee chair)

Trish Jubb (Aug '10 - May '11) (Programme coordinator)

Elaine Binhammer (Aug '10 – May '11) (Youth subcommittee chair and assistant secretary)

Stephen Miller (Sept '10 – May '11) (Vice treasurer and Merchandise coordinator)

Katja Gottschewski (Nov '10 – May '11) (Site manager)

Others involved

Debbie Finucane (Registrar, transport coordinator and venue research)

Alexis Miller (Chair of newsletter working group)

Thank you also to all those who have helped in some way with organising Autscope 2011, including the many members of subcommittees.

The Future

Now that Autscope has become a charitable company, its future is as The Autscope Organisation. In that guise, we are, of course, focussed on producing another successful

¹ All those named here have continued in the same or equivalent roles with The Autscope Organisation from May 2011 to August 2011 and will be credited in those roles in the first annual report of The Autscope Organisation later this year.

Autscape conference in July 2012. However, we also hope to continue our process of clarifying and documenting Autscape's governance to improve quality, accountability and sustainability. We also intend to continue to introduce membership benefits to encourage the take up and renewal of membership and to develop our fundraising strategy. We will continue to look at ways to make Autscape as accessible as possible and to enhance the programme Autscape is able to offer.

The Autscape Management Committee