Overview

The adult services team were pleased to be part of another fulfilling year for our members, many of whom achieved remarkable feats on their journey with us. Be it, getting paid employment or simply putting into practise the basic social skills they have learnt through our courses, members have continued to develop in a variety of individual ways.

Alongside the successes we have also had many challenges. This year we have seen an unprecedented number of adults with autism requesting support from our services, partly due to increased awareness and partly because there is very limited provision elsewhere. In turn, we have continued to increase entry points into our service and for the first time we have had to introduce waiting lists for our most oversubscribed services.

We are thrilled to be able to share some of the highlights that our adult services members have enjoyed this year and we hope you enjoy reading some of the success that they have achieved.
Our services

Since we first began providing services for adults our services have expanded to meet more needs of our growing membership:

joining our services

Any adult with high functioning autism or Asperger’s syndrome can refer themselves to our services. After you have contacted us we will arrange a time to meet with you to identify your individuals needs and strengths. We will then discuss the opportunities and services that Autism Bedfordshire provide to see if they are of interest...

Daytime Social Activity Groups
Evening Social Activity Groups
Skill Development Courses
Employment Support

Our members report that as a result of our services they have an increase in resilience, confidence, social skills, structure and opportunities available to them
Last year we began providing regular daytime social groups for the first time. They were established to meet the growing demand from members who were looking for more structure and social opportunities in their lives.

Whilst this started out as a monthly session in both Bedford and Luton, the demand became so great that we now have fortnightly sessions in both locations.

The Bedford group is predominantly a walking group that meets every fortnight to take in views of Bedford or local indoor attractions.

The Luton group alternate between a walking session and a lunch group each fortnight.

These sessions provide the perfect opportunity for members who are more comfortable socialising in an informal manner where very few social demands are placed upon them.
The evening social groups have continued to offer a variety of activities across Bedfordshire. Within the sessions, group members are encouraged to engage with their peers and the community through structured activities. These sessions remain a popular choice for many of our members as it often provides one of the few opportunities they have to socialise independently of their family unit. Attendees have enjoyed visiting local restaurants, the cinema, bowling or simply cooking for themselves at the groups main venue. This year we have delivered sessions in Bedford, Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard.

**Evening social groups**

Over 1,600 hours of daytime social opportunities were provided.

- 52 evening social groups took place.
- 87% of attendees felt their stress levels reduce.
- 57 individuals have accessed an evening social group.

**Our impact...**

‘I have explored new places’

‘I have better self esteem and more friends’

‘This group has helped my wellbeing’

‘Thursday nights are a thing to look forward to’

‘I am more self confident’

[www.autismbeds.org](http://www.autismbeds.org)
The skills courses have provided several functions this year, adapting to the needs of our members. Overall we have run 10 different skills courses across Bedfordshire, each one 6-8 weeks in duration delivered by two qualified staff members.

We delivered two social and communication skills courses that were designed for persons who had great difficulty with basic social skills to such an extent that their low confidence did not allow them to access the social groups.

We also delivered a more advanced communication skills course entitled Increasing resilience in the community. This course increased learners exposure to the community by setting tasks that required them to interact with the public in an effort to increase learners confidence outside of Autism Bedfordshire.

In addition to communication skills courses we also ran a bespoke travel training course for individuals who were experiencing significant barriers accessing opportunities due to being unable to navigate public transport.

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Employment remains a key concern for much of our membership be it finding employment, maintaining a current role or navigating the complex social demands that a workplace can cause.

Subsequently we have been providing flexible employment support packages to 29 of our members over the course of the year. Our support has ranged from group job clubs, structured one to one support, mediation with employers, interview practice and job searching.

We encourage members who have had a successful journey through our employment support to stay in touch via our other services to ensure we are never far away if needed.

We are extremely proud of the strides that our members have made through this support. However we recognise that much work needs to be done to make work places and job application processes more autism friendly and we continue to advocate for this.

‘it has given me much more confidence working with new people and within a new environment’

‘I have met different people and found work’

‘the employment support has aided me greatly in my job search’
We know that there are many adults with autism who are not engaging with our core services but are in need of support. In an effort to make our services more accessible to these individuals we developed a programme of interest led sessions that used different activities as a vehicle to encourage engagement.

Through this programme we worked with experts in the field to provide art, rowing and tennis sessions across Bedfordshire and were delighted to see so many new people interacting with our services.

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To keep our services running we need to raise over £120,000 every year.

We achieved this from the three local authorities, grant making organisations and community fundraising from our members.

To everyone who has contributed to our services we want to say a massive
THANK YOU!

www.autismbeds.org
Skills course and daytime social groups

In 2016 Daniel decided to take early retirement from his job and needed support to replace the structure that he inevitably lost.

Although he said he ‘wasn’t interested in people’ and ‘didn’t understand them’, he felt he could benefit from coming on our Communication and Social skills course. When asked what he wanted most from the course he said ‘To increase my social skills. At present I am not a sociable person’. His targets were to join the daytime social group and to initiate a conversation each week. He has surprised himself and us, over the 8 weeks of the course, as he has gradually become much more confident about initiating conversations, including opening up to the group about a number of challenges he has faced in his work and personal life.

The sharing of information with others on the course has included revealing an interest in music and owning a guitar he hadn’t played but with encouragement from one of our leaders is now learning to do so.

He has also ‘tried out’ the communication skills he has learned on the course at our daytime social groups which in turn has developed his self esteem and given him an insight into how time with or alongside others can be beneficial.

Daniel is an example of a person who has received a late diagnosis but has clearly benefitted from our services and we hope that his future will be more fulfilled and less isolated.
Employment support

Mark had encountered significant difficulties in the workplace relating to engaging with customers and his colleagues. This had led to a series of incidents resulting in a breakdown of communication within his immediate team. Coupled with consistent poor attendance and punctuality Mark had received a final warning in relation to his performance and it was at this point that Mark’s employer requested support on his behalf.

Autism Bedfordshire initially met with Mark’s line management to discuss the difficulties being experienced. This process involved explaining some of Mark’s behaviour in relation to his Autism and agreeing a way forward that was practical for both Mark and the employer.

In addition to this initial meeting, Autism Bedfordshire provided regular 1:1 support to Mark evaluating his performance and offering guidance relating to any difficulties he faced alongside retaining open communications with Mark’s manager. We were pleased to see an almost immediate improvement in Mark’s performance resulting in positive feedback from his team leader in both his work and reliability.

Since February 2017, Mark has been accessing a communication skills course which has complimented his ongoing workplace support. Mark’s self-esteem, energy levels and awareness of his communication with others were all noticeably increased. This positive feedback has been re-enforced by ongoing positive feedback from Mark’s employer and serves as an example of the significant impact that professional, considered and sustained support can be to someone.
Skills course and employment support

Peter’s mum contacted our helpline requesting support for her son. He had successfully completed a university course and had returned home with little structure and very few opportunities. We invited Peter into our offices to discuss his options. Upon assessment Peter identified his need to develop his social skills and hoped to gain experience within a workplace environment when he felt confident enough to do so. Subsequently a colleague put an action plan in place that would see him achieve the goals he had set himself. In October 2016 Peter accessed a social and communications course to help him increase his social skills in a directed learning environment. The course lasted eight weeks and gave Peter increased self-esteem and confidence to further empower him in his quest to gain work experience.

To build on his development Autism Bedfordshire staff sought a six week work placement which Peter thrived in. Peter is now looking to start his second work placement and we are confident that he will be successful within paid employment when he decides he is ready to enter the job market.
We have provided more direct support this year than ever before and continue to provide consistent quality services throughout Bedfordshire...

Making a difference...

- 2617 members in 2013-2014
- 3242 members in 2014-2015
- 4418 members in 2015-2016
- 5315 members in 2016-2017

94% of our members reported greater self-esteem as a result of accessing our services.

97% of our members reported feeling less isolated as a result of accessing our services.

75% of our members noticed their stress levels reduce as a result of accessing our services.

A huge thanks goes to the dedicated staff team and volunteers who make such a tremendous difference:

- Clare Shuffill—Senior group leader—Leighton Buzzard evening social group
- Abbey Ward—Senior group leader—Dunstable evening social group
- Chris Johnson—Group leader—Bedford evening social group
- Sharna Raine—Senior group leader—Bedford evening social group
- Debbie Ward—Volunteer—Bedford daytime and evening social group
- Rachel Smith—Volunteer—Leighton Buzzard evening social group
- Alex McGuinness—Autism advisory tutor—Countywide
- Lorraine Endersby—Employment Support Officer—Countywide
- Mandy Higgs—Autism awareness trainer—Countywide
- Ian Baguley—Support officer—Bedford daytime and evening social group
- Sally Cripsey—Autism advisory Teacher—Bedford skills development courses
- Pat Knight—Group support worker—Bedford skills development courses
- Greg Howe—Group leader—Leighton Buzzard and Dunstable evening social group

Coming in 2017—2018...

For the past 12 months we have been receiving a sustained number of new referrals asking for support resulting in waiting lists for services. Whilst we are delighted that so many people are reaching out for support we cannot facilitate such large numbers without increasing the amount of money we have to spend. As a result we will be looking to secure further funding over the next two months so that in addition to the services we already provide, we can open:

1. A daytime social group in Leighton Buzzard
2. Another evening social group in Bedford designed for 18-25 year olds
3. A community based group designed for mature adults who have received a diagnosis later in life