



## **Autism**

The National Autistic Society (NAS) states that 1% of the population has an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In Berkshire, this equates to 8,000 people (*NAS website*).

ASD is a lifelong disability that impairs the way an individual understands the world, communicates with and relates to people around them. Difficulties making themselves understood and a lack of intuitive understanding of social 'norms', means people with an ASD have to consciously learn to recognise and react appropriately to social rules and queues. This is usually compounded by a lack of flexible thinking or 'social imagination' making it difficult to work out where a social situation may lead, how a problem may be resolved, or how to organise themselves to complete a task: many people with an ASD must learn what is required of them as many of us learn our times tables.

### ***Berkshire Autistic Society (BAS)***

Over the last 20 years, BAS has grown to an established registered charity with over 500 families registered in our BAS network. BAS's culture is to actively promote partnership working with organisations to ensure the ASD community receive the best possible services available including all Berkshire based ASD charities and voluntary groups, Berkshire PCT, Thames Valley Police, 6 Berkshire LA's, all Berkshire schools, colleges and Universities and Private Sector organisations.

BAS runs a programme of activities, workshops, support groups, information resource services, and education sessions to support some of the needs of people affected by ASD in Berkshire, which includes individuals with an ASD as well as their carers and families. Through these activities and services, the BAS aims to improve the social skills and connections of adults with an ASD who would otherwise be isolated, lonely and without means of accessing activities that are considered normal for people without an ASD. For young people with an ASD, a variety of leisure and sports activities are provided giving an opportunity for participants to develop social, educational and physical skills and for carers and families to enjoy fun activities together. In addition, the BAS provide workshops, group sessions and information and advice services to support carers and families in a variety of ASD related issues.

***BAS need to continually work to raise every penny of the funds they need to continue to deliver the services that make such a difference to the people affected by Autism in Berkshire.***



## ***Helping Families Overcome Social Isolation***

Through listening to needs of local people affected by ASD, BAS understand the difficulties families face with everyday activities. These difficulties are rooted in the behaviours that arise in the person with an ASD when they are faced with a new situation, loud unusual noise, or unfamiliar people. The behaviours can appear strange and can attract staring and even negative comments from the wider public. Dealing with these situations is extremely difficult for many families. The result is often that they give up attending activities and become socially isolated.

To address this issue BAS provide opportunities for individuals with an ASD and their families to have fun and enjoy everyday activities, and carer respite when possible, through regular ASD friendly sport and leisure sessions. These sessions not only increase physical activity, but also relaxation and development of social and communication skills. These activities are aimed at children and young people aged 5 to 16 with ASD, plus siblings, parents and carers. Some of these activities include:

- ***Trampolining*** to improve physical and emotional health. Provides environment where children can have fun and develop and practice social skills.
- ***Family Fun Swimming*** for families to enjoy an activity together for both individual with an ASD, carers, parents and siblings.
- ***Pokemon*** at a specialist Children's Resource Centre to play Nintendo DS, Wii and Game Cube games, aiming to develop social communication skills and an opportunity to have fun, with social support and respite benefits for parents and carers.
- ***Thames Valley Adventure Playground*** provides a fun interactive venue for development of social, educational and physical skills, as well as social support and respite benefits for parents and carers.
- ***Family Days Out*** provide an opportunity to have relaxed time as a family in an ASD friendly supportive environment, and positive interaction for parents with their child and the opportunity to experience a 'normal' activity.



## ***Action for Adults with an ASD***

Adults with an ASD often lead lonely lives. In a recent NAS survey only 28% of adults surveyed had access to social groups for people with ASD/AS. Isolation can lead to anxieties, depression and result in severe mental health problems.

These issues are particularly relevant to adults with an ASD at the more able end of the autistic spectrum, (i.e., having Asperger Syndrome [AS] or High Functioning Autism). They do not meet the strict eligibility criteria that would qualify them for learning disability or for mental health services – even though their lives may be severely affected by their condition - and therefore find themselves completely without support in Society.

To address this issue BAS have a variety of services aimed at adults aged 18 and above:

- ***Adult Social Groups*** are provided to improve opportunities for social contact for people who would otherwise be isolated, lonely and without means of accessing activities that are considered normal for people without an ASD. It is a social intersection group where members can share worries and check understanding of issues as well as a vehicle for learning appropriate social communication. As a result, adults affected by ASD will be given an opportunity to feel less social isolation, can develop friendships, learn new skills, gain confidence, and have opportunity for new experiences. The group meets every two weeks, has a core group has an average of 30 people attending each meeting.
- ***Healthy Living Workshop*** is a five week course that delivers training on the need to maintain good mental and physical health, and advice on how to achieve it.
- ***Employment Skills Project*** provides both education and work experience placements to adults on the spectrum who need extra support to help them into employment. Part of the project also helps adults who are in employment but need help to overcome problems they are experiencing in the workplace.
- ***Berkshire Autism Alert card*** is being introduced across Berkshire for Adults with an ASD to use when they may come into difficulties with the Police or emergency services.



## ***Carer and Family Support***

The BAS provide direct support to individuals with an ASD, their carers, and their wider family in the form of ***personal support*** and ***information***.

- The ***personal support*** element of the project aims to address the biggest impact on those caring for individuals with an ASD: the devastating emotional impact of your child being diagnosed with a life-long condition and social isolation. Carers of people with an ASD become isolated by being restricted by the inflexible living patterns, anxieties and the sensory issues of the individual they care for. They often suffer from lack of sleep because of the disturbed sleep patterns of the child they care for. Lack of sleep, worry and isolation lead many into depression. Berkshire Autistic Society runs a Home Visit service for families whose child has been recently diagnosed. The society also runs parental support groups which bring parents together to share experiences and support each. Education sessions and workshops are also run to address needs raised by parents and carers.
- The ***information*** element of the project is run to provide one point of contact where those needing information can be offered direction to the resources, services or people who they need. BAS provide concise and focused information for those with a new diagnosis and provide information for families that will support them at the various stages of their child's development and into adulthood. BAS can provide understanding and information about an individual's particular situation with regards to diagnosis, education, entitlements.

Berkshire Autistic Society delivers their support services **across Berkshire**, through the hard work and dedication of trained support workers and volunteers.

### ***Did you know?***

- The BAS Helpline is open all year, 9.30am – 4pm five days a week.
- BAS currently run Parent Support Groups in Reading, Windsor, Maidenhead, Bracknell and Theale.