



Meeting the challenge of Covid-19

Autism Berkshire is the leading autism charity in the county, with more than 30 years' experience of delivering high-quality services for autistic people of all ages and their families.

2020-21 proved to be among the most challenging in the 30 years since the formation of the Berkshire Autistic Society in 1990.

The coronavirus pandemic drove a radical rethink of how advice and support services could be delivered and hit community fundraising activity hard, while changes in NHS autism support arrangements in Berkshire meant a reshaping of Autism Berkshire's operations.

Reacting to the initial lockdown in late March 2020, the Autism Berkshire team moved quickly to adapt services for online delivery.

The success of these changes was recognised in March 2021, with the award of a National Census 2021 Purple Plaque to the charity's Chief Executive Officer,

Jane Stanford-Beale, for her contribution to the community during the coronavirus pandemic.

The series of lockdowns caused by the pandemic and associated social distancing rules meant that holding an event to celebrate the charity's 30th anniversary was not possible, and the Annual Meeting in November had to take place online.

One anniversary project that did bear fruit was an update of the Berkshire Autism Alert Card, which was given a new look 10 years after it was introduced, producing a surge in demand which saw the 2,000th card issued.

Please read on to find out more about Autism Berkshire's work in 2020-21 and how you can get involved and support our work.



Talking sense about autism.

 Helpline: 01189 594 594 
www.autismberkshire.org.uk

What people say about Autism Berkshire's services

"Thank you so much for your time last night. We really both found it very useful. It was great to speak you and get very useful information. And many thanks for the summaries and all the links, I will definitely go through them."

– A parent after a 'virtual' Home Visit on video link

"I've attended other courses to try and help understand my son's behaviour, but it's only now, with the Managing Anger course, that I can now start to relate to it. Thank you so much!"

– A parent who attended an online autism advice workshop

"I can't thank you enough. Lockdown has been the most challenging time I have experienced so far as a parent and the online seminars I have attended have changed life at home. I finally feel like I understand my son. I will never forget how amazing your service has been. Thank you from us all."

– A parent in summer 2020

"I'd like to say a HUGE thank you for running the course. I found it extremely useful - great to have the time and headspace to think properly and reflect. Your knowledge and insight was fantastic and invaluable. It really helped me to think and process things differently. How lovely to meet the other parents too. It's always helpful to be in touch with others who can share concerns, tips and advice."

– A parent who took part in an online Teen Life course, autumn 2020

"I really liked it. It was tailor-made for the age group and practical, rather than academic, in focus."

– A parent who took part in an online EarlyBird Plus course, autumn 2020

In Numbers 2020-21

£150,000	benefits awarded to clients of our Benefits Service
3,800	people follow our Facebook page
2,000	Berkshire Autism Alert Cards in use
1,650	people follow us on Twitter
998	individual contacts with families Jan-Mar 2021
87	online workshops, course sessions and support groups run

Support services move online

The first coronavirus lockdown was just days old when Autism Berkshire's 2020-21 year began and had already caused the cancellation of the second All About Autism conference in Slough at the end of March.

Staff moved quickly to develop alternative ways of working to maintain support services. Home working became the norm for most staff, while others were placed on furlough.

The Benefits Service switched to online video appointments with clients from the first week of April, and extra pages were added to the website to outline what advice and support was available from the charity and links to information for parents and carers about other sources of support, help with home-schooling and leisure activities for children and families to enjoy at home.

Autism advice workshops and courses were quickly reshaped for online delivery using Zoom and Teams, with a programme of online sessions for parents and carers launched in mid-April.

Autism Berkshire became the first organisation in the country approved by the National Autistic Society to deliver its Teen Life course for parents of 10 to 16-year-olds online. Autism Berkshire's Training and Family Support Lead Julia Cox, who had adapted the course, then advised other licensed trainers around the country who were making the move to online delivery.

Many parents who joined online workshops said that it was the first time they had been able to attend, in part thanks to having greater control over their time through working from home.

During the year, the NAS EarlyBird Plus course for parents of children in primary school was added to the range of support available for parents and carers, along with new workshops about Food Refusal and Autism in Girls.

To help families struggling with the effects of the repeated coronavirus pandemic lockdowns, a new Wellbeing & Autism course was developed, supported by Reading Borough Council's New Directions community learning service. And a weekly online get-together for parents and carers, the Friday Lunch Break, with Autism Berkshire family support worker Amanda Walker and Berkshire autism advocate Carly Jones MBE, proved popular after its launch in January.

The Bear With Me and 197 Club adult social groups switched to meeting online due to closures of their regular venues and social distancing rules. Numbers taking part were down on normal meetings, as many members found the online format difficult, but contact with them was maintained by email and phone.



A summer picnic for Bear With Me members kindly hosted by Beech Lodge School, just outside Maidenhead, was the only face-to-face activity all year, though many members met Helen Harris and her son Scott, who co-ordinate the group, just before Christmas to collect seasonal goody bags at Braywick Heath Nurseries, *pictured*. The Maidenhead Advertiser newspaper sent along a photographer and published a report about this event.

Providing leisure activities for children and young people proved a challenge, with all activities suspended at the start of the pandemic.

An exemption for activities for disabled children later in 2020 allowed resumption of some trampolining sessions for children from families who were using our autism support services. We are especially grateful to the team at Bracknell Trampoline Centre for running the sessions and to the Pinewood Centre, near Crowthorne, for providing a venue for part of the year.

To help families of autistic and ADHD children to prepare for the return to school in September 2020 after several months of disrupted education, Autism Berkshire teamed up with local charities Parenting Special Children and The Autism Group and the East Berkshire and Berkshire West NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups to create a leaflet featuring top tips to support children's self-esteem, boost social skills and re-establish routines.

The leaflet was designed by Eden Sinclair, an autistic graduate in graphic communication. She also designed an Autism Berkshire face covering exemption card, for autistic people who needed to show that they were covered by Government guidance allowing some disabled people go without a face mask in shops and on public transport during the pandemic.

Eden was also responsible creating a new look for the Berkshire Autism Alert Card. The project was supported by a grant from the Thames Valley Police & Crime Commissioner's Office. Cardholders can now choose to share some information about their autism to help police and other emergency service staff to provide appropriate assistance when they are shown an alert card.

With social distancing restrictions ruling out holding a public meeting, the charity's annual event was held online in November, with the spotlight on the Benefits Service, which helps autistic people and their families with applications for welfare benefits and offers advice and support for appeals.

After a period of reduced demand for benefits advice over the summer of 2020, requests for help rose in the autumn, including representation at mandatory reconsideration and appeal tribunal hearings. Tribunals were a particular challenge, because they were being carried out by telephone conference calls due to the pandemic.

During the course of the year, Autism Berkshire took part in two tenders to deliver autism advice and support services for the families of children and young people on behalf of the East Berkshire and Berkshire West NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups.

While the Berkshire West contract was secured (*see panel on right*), in East Berkshire a private contractor was awarded the work. After running some workshops on its behalf in the last quarter of 2020, it was decided to end this arrangement, reducing Autism Berkshire's activities in the Bracknell Forest, Slough and Windsor & Maidenhead council areas.

Support transformed



The start of 2021 saw the launch of the new Berkshire West Autism & ADHD Support Service to help children & young people and their families in Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire.

Demand for support surged in the first quarter of 2021, in part due to the third coronavirus pandemic lockdown.

Schools were closed again to most pupils and families were advised to stay at home as much as possible, only adding to the existing challenges of daily life for families of children with additional needs.

During this period, Autism Berkshire's family support team had 998 individual contacts with families in the three council areas and assisted 40% more families than in the first quarter of 2020, at a time when they were also delivering services in East Berkshire. Some autism advice workshops were run twice to meet the demand for places.

And while the service specification called for 15 Home Visits to families to be provided in the first three months of the year, 81 virtual visits were made using video links or telephone calls.

Autism Berkshire formed a partnership with Parenting Special Children to bid to run the new service on behalf of the Berkshire West NHS Clinical Commissioning Group and won the contract in a competitive tender the previous autumn.

The service provides enhanced assistance to families of children & young people aged between 5 and 25 who have a diagnosis of autism and/or ADHD, or are on the Berkshire CAMHS waiting lists for assessment, building on the two charities' previous work on behalf of the CCG.

A number of additional workshops for parents and carers, focused on key issues such as autism in girls, food refusal, sleep and transitions to adulthood are now funded by the CCG and children can benefit from new social interaction courses.

Teen Life courses for parents and carers of autistic children aged 10 to 16 also form part of the service offer, along with SocialEyes social skills courses for autistic young people aged 16 to 25.

More information about the Berkshire West Autism & ADHD Support Service is available on the Autism Berkshire website www.autismberkshire.org.uk

Fundraising

With the country going into lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic just days before the start of the new financial year, plans for regular fundraising activity had to be put on hold.

Events including the Reading and Bracknell Half-Marathons, which runners regularly use to raise funds for us in sponsorship, were cancelled, along with community events over the summer, so alternative approaches were needed to secure income to support the charity's services.

Applications to a number of local and national grant-making bodies for help from Covid emergency funding schemes to cover general expenditure and key projects were successful and the charity also benefited from a Government grant scheme, as well as claiming Gift Aid proceeds linked to donations.

Supporters of the charity also rallied round, including staff at LEO Pharma UK & Ireland, who came up with an innovative way to raise money, taking on a virtual walking challenge when getting exercise during the first coronavirus lockdown.

Their aim was to cover the equivalent of the 1,600 miles from the firm's UK office at Hurley, near Maidenhead, to its global headquarters at Ballerup, near the Danish capital Copenhagen, and back again. In the end they clocked up 1,652 miles and raised £1,000 for our funds.

The team at business telecoms company ComXo in Datchet, near Windsor, raised more than £400 with a raffle at their office, which was topped up by sponsorship from walking, running and skipping during the lockdown at the start of 2021. Our thanks also go to Berkshire Community Foundation for their backing of this fundraising initiative.

Since October 2020, we have been raising money to pay for Teen Life courses through the Co-operative Local Community Fund, with Co-op Group members able to nominate us to receive a donation every time they shop or use other Co-op services. Our fundraising is also supported by the two Co-op shops and the Co-operative Funeralcare office in Caversham. Our participation in the fund runs until October 2021, with more than £1,500 raised by the end of March. For more details, see <https://membership.coop.co.uk/causes/48513>

The family and friends of the late Nancy England, an assistant tutor on our community education courses who died at the start of 2020, donated more than £6,000 in her memory, which will be used to fund art and creative activities for autistic children during school holidays. Nancy was a teacher in Maidenhead for many years.

A number of individual donations, large and small, were received during the year, including £4,000 from the West Berkshire Crematorium in Thatcham.

- Information about how to get involved with fundraising for Autism Berkshire is available on our website.



Thank you

To our funders and supporters

- Albert Hunt Trust
- Austin & Hope Pilkington Trust
- Berkshire Community Foundation
- Bracknell Town Council
- British Science Association
- Charities Aid Foundation (CAF)
- Co-operative Local Community Fund
- Crowthorne Parish Council
- Gerald Palmer Eling Trust
- Giving Tree - Connect Reading
- Greenham Trust
- Heathrow Community Trust
- LEO Pharma UK
- Louis Baylis Charitable Trust
- Matthew Wells – In Memoriam
- Morrisons Foundation
- Nancy England – In Memoriam
- Nicola Tanner
- Peter Baker Foundation
- Postcode Community Trust
- Reading St Laurence Church Charities
- Reading Voluntary Action
- Richard Flemming
- Rory Smyth
- Silvia Waddilove Foundation
- Sir Jules Thorn Trust/Ann Rylands Grants
- Tesco Bags of Help
- TK Maxx Foundation
- Waitrose Supermarkets
- West Berkshire Crematorium
- William Grant & Sons
- Wokingham Without Parish Council

To our key partners

- Berkshire West NHS Clinical Commissioning Group
- East Berkshire NHS Clinical Commissioning Group
- BBC Children in Need
- Slough Council for Voluntary Service SPACE Project
- The Henry Smith Charity
- National Lottery Community Fund
- Reading Borough Council
- West Berkshire Council
- Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead Council

Financial Summary for 2020-21

Total Income	£239,000
Grants and Subscriptions	£213,000
Donations and Fundraising	£26,000
Expenditure on Charitable Activities	£234,700
Fundraising costs	£2,000
Governance costs	£2,000
Surplus taken to reserves	£300
Reserves carried forward to 2021-22	£78,000

For 2021-2022 we are forecasting that our expenditure will exceed income, as continuing Covid restrictions continue to limit our ability to fundraise and our ability to deliver autism advice and support services and social & leisure activities.



Talking sense about autism.

Autism Berkshire – the working name for Berkshire Autistic Society

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