

Helen Harris, front, centre, at the Bear With Me social group's Christmas party when she said farewell after running the group since its launch in 2007 – see inside for more details

Annual Review 2024-25 Autism Berkshire

Driving
Change

Adapting to challenge of new approaches to support

Autism Berkshire is the leading autism charity in Berkshire, with 35 years' experience of delivering high-quality services for autistic people of all ages and their families.

While the Berkshire West Autism & ADHD Support Service and Berkshire Adult Autism Support Service both offer established models of support to autistic people and their families, changes of approach by the NHS meant both had to evolve during the year.

Against a backdrop of increasing demand for autism assessments and lengthening waiting lists, Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust switched to a needs-led system of support in the autumn of 2024, with schools asked to implement help for children before they could be considered as candidates for diagnosis.

The change led to a surge in requests from parents and carers for help from the Berkshire West service, with new registrations running at double the normal rate in early 2025.

More than 10,000 people read our Facebook post about the move and we compiled parents' feedback about the change of approach and its implementation and sent them to health and education officials.

After a successful initial two-year contract to provide the Berkshire Adult Autism Support Service, we were awarded a new deal by the NHS in late 2024 to continue to support

autistic adults throughout the county. Extra problem-solving and advice session for adults and their carers in East Berkshire were launched in Slough in February 2025.

Our CEO, Jane Stanford-Beale, also contributed to efforts to improve and develop services for autistic people in the county, attending autism partnership board meetings in the each of the council areas and meetings with officials from the NHS integrated care boards serving the county.

The charity also played a key role in a Quality Improvement Programme at Reading's Prospect Park Hospital, helping to make it more autism-friendly, after several adults we support experienced issues with care and facilities at the hospital.

Elsewhere, attendances at our trampolining sessions for children and teenagers at Bracknell Trampoline Centre and our 197 Club and Bear With Me social groups for adults remained at a high level. Draws for free tickets to go racing at Ascot, attend Circus Starr's SEND-friendly shows in Reading, performances by Woodley Light Opera or Welford Park's Spectacle of Light event all attracted plenty of entries.

Please read on to find out more about Autism Berkshire's work in 2024-25 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

"Many, many thanks for calling yesterday. For all those years I have felt so alone and, to be honest, confused, lost and in deep despair. Life has been so overwhelming. Hearing from you was just amazing and has given me hope. You got me! You understood!"

– Autistic adult who contacted the Helpline service

"I want to say a massive thank you for these workshops - I have really enjoyed them, and I am learning so much about myself. Even in such a short period of time I feel like I have been able to take some small steps."

– Autistic adult who attended autism advice workshops

"Thank you for all the brilliant workshops the past couple of months. I have learned a lot and understand my girl a lot better after this. Still a long way to go, but the more tools we get to cope, the better it is."

– Mother of an autistic teenager who attended autism advice workshops

"My email enquiries regarding workshops or therapy referrals have always been answered promptly. I am reassured that I can always get support or advice from the team easily from a phone call or by email."

– Parent of an autistic child who contacted the Helpline service

"The boys get so much from these sessions. I can't tell you enough how grateful we are. I haven't seen either of them enjoy anything other than this, it really is the highlight of their week."

– Parent of children who attended our trampolining sessions

"Thank you so much for such an amazing welcoming email. It's overwhelming reaching out but lovely to get the sense of support instantly."

– Parent of an autistic child who contacted the Helpline service

In Numbers 2024-25

6,862	Facebook followers
4,556	Thames Valley and Berkshire Autism Alert Cards in use
4,509	Individual contacts with the Berkshire West Autism & ADHD Support Service
5,090	Individual contacts with the Berkshire Adult Autism Support Service
820	Families supported by the Berkshire West Autism & ADHD Support Service
592	Autistic adults and their parents/carers supported by the Berkshire Adult Autism Support Service

Developing our activities to meet growing demand

Against the backdrop of the challenges noted on the front page of this Annual Review, we continued to deliver high-quality services to an increasing number of individuals and families.

The number of families registered with the Berkshire West Autism & ADHD Support Service kept growing, up from 1,450 at the start of April 2024 to 1,700 12 months later.

The number of people registered with the Berkshire Adult Autism Support Service grew by almost a third, from 450 to 592, well ahead of the target set in the contract with the NHS.

And the charity's Annual General Meeting, held online in January 2025, heard that number of young adults contacting the service had come as a surprise, as had the high proportion of women registered - 56% of its service users - contrary to expectations that older men would be in the majority. About two thirds of clients had an autism diagnosis, while a quarter were on the assessment pathway.

Developments of the service included extra in-person problem-solving and advice meet-ups in Slough, to complement those held in Reading, and the advice workshops for parents and carers of autistic adults were revised to ease the time commitment needed to attend. Experienced adult support worker Eleri Booth joined the team as an adult autism support mentor in February 2025.

And our partnership with employment support charity GRAFT Thames Valley continued to develop, with a number of adult support service users moving into jobs after being helped by GRAFT.

Funding from the Frimley NHS Integrated Care Board, to support consultation events linked to the NHS Improvement Plan, allowed us to hold three meetings in Bracknell, Maidenhead and Slough to gather autistic adults' experiences of services and ways to improve them.

The Berkshire West Autism & ADHD Support Service added a Transition to Primary School workshop for parents and carers in the 2024 summer term to help them and their children prepare for the challenges they may experience.

The service's other advice workshops remained popular, with the overwhelming majority fully booked throughout the year, while service users were able to get together and talk to the service's support workers at two Meet the Teams events held in Reading in conjunction with the adult support service.

Funds were drawn from the charity's reserves to pay for a short-term volunteer co-ordinator role to help recruit and develop a group of autistic adults to support staff at information and community fundraising events.





Alongside the advice and support services, social and leisure activities remained an important part of the charity's work, with the trampolining sessions for children and teenagers on Sundays at Bracknell Trampoline Centre in high demand. An innovation for the summer of 2024 was some fun holiday sessions, which also provided an opportunity to offer families a taster session, with several children then joining regular sessions in the autumn. Some of the children who took part and parents are pictured, above, with our CEO Jane Stanford-Beale and lead trampolining coach Michelle Errington.

The Walk & Talk activity group for autistic adults was featured in the *Maidenhead Advertiser* newspaper and on its website in April 2024 during Autism Awareness Week and members of the Bear With Me group also went walking for a couple of meetings in the summer – a refit at The Bear pub in Maidenhead meant the group walked from Cookham Moor to The Bounty pub, alongside the River Thames at Cock Marsh.

Members also enjoyed a day out at the seaside in Bournemouth, with the Berkshire Masonic Charity funding the cost of hiring the coach, and a barbecue at Beech Lodge School at Stubbings.

The school also kindly allowed us to use its facilities free of charge for another series of Art in the Summer workshops, which were paid for by a fundraising drive by Sophie England, and for a Chop & Chat course for autistic adults in the autumn, with 18 people taking part.

We developed a strong relationship with Ascot racecourse after supporting the opening of their dedicated sensory room in March 2024, with more families able to enjoy a free day at the races in the autumn at the QIPCO British Champions Day. Autism Berkshire staff, along with Hazel Wright, CEO of our partners GRAFT Thames Valley, were invited to enjoy lunch in the summer at a test day for restaurant staff the day before the Royal Ascot meeting began.

A painting of a lighthouse from the 2024 Art in the Summer workshops, left

Adult support pioneer

Helen Harris, *pictured below*, the charity's autism development worker for East Berkshire, retired at the end of 2024, after working for the charity since 2007 and spearheading support for autistic adults for much of that time.

A qualified social worker, she was recruited in 2007 to carry out an assessment of needs for autistic adults. This led to the launch of what became the Bear With Me social group in Maidenhead in September that year, supported by Windsor & Maidenhead Council.

Its first meeting, at the Que Pasa restaurant, was attended by just six people, but rapid growth in attendances eventually led to a move to The Bear pub, which has been its home ever since and inspired the group's name, with regular attendances of 40 to 50 people each week. She said farewell to the group's members at its Christmas party at Maidenhead Rugby Club.

Helen also advised many autistic adults and their families about a wide range of concerns and problems over the past 17 years, latterly under the umbrella of the Berkshire Adult Autism Support Service, and co-ordinated community education courses for adults at Langley College and in Reading.

She developed an in-house course for Autism Berkshire called Chop & Chat, which was first run at Langley College in the autumn of 2019, built around preparing and sharing a meal each week, with discussions about life skills, developing conversation skills and problem-solving. The course in the autumn of 2024, held at Beech Lodge School, on the outskirts of Maidenhead, was the best-attended ever.

In response to requests from Bear With Me members in surveys, Helen also set up a daytime activity group for autistic adults, called Walk & Talk. A trial walk in the summer of 2021 proved popular and funding was then secured to launch a regular group in early 2022, which went out and about on walks at locations in the east of Berkshire and nearby.

Another project led by Helen in 2023 and 2024 was Art in the Summer – workshops for autistic adults to showcase their artistic skills, supported by a specialist tutor, with these sessions also kindly hosted by Beech Lodge School.

Helen said: "Over the years, there have been many changes, but one thing remained constant: the unwavering support of Autism Berkshire and our members.

"It has been an incredible privilege to serve this wonderful community, and I want to thank everyone for their support, friendship and commitment to the groups over the years."

Her son Scott, who worked alongside her at Bear With Me since 2016, succeeded Helen as the lead facilitator for Bear With Me and Walk & Talk.



Fundraising

Autism Berkshire's fundraising made a splash at the 2024 Pangbourne Village Fete in June, with a crew contesting the Dragon Boat races to support the Bear With Me social group for adults, along with a tombola on our stall. The event was such a success that plans were made to return for the 2025 event.

Autism-Berkshire-branded vests for the Dragon Boat crew were kindly sponsored by Berkshire-based payroll outsourcing company Omnia. The firm also made its second £5,000 donation towards the running costs of the Thames Valley Autism Alert Card scheme during the year.

Another athletic endeavour saw Jacob Burls, from Twyford, run in a 10k event at Dinton Pastures Country Park, near Winnersh, in May 2024, raising more than £500 in sponsorship to help other autistic people in the county and thank us for supporting him and his family after he was given an autism diagnosis when he was a child.

Footballers from IT services company SmartCT, *pictured below*, based in Twyford, took part in a Business Fives Charity Tournament in February 2025 and raised more than £700 for us in sponsorship and Gift Aid.

The Princess Margaret Hospital, in Windsor, celebrated being awarded the National Autistic Society's Accreditation for Healthcare providers award at the start of 2025 by holding a cake sale, which raised almost £200 for us.

And Natalie Baker, the publisher of *This is U* magazine, donated 10% of the cover price of every copy sold of the Christmas edition to Autism Berkshire.

Many national charitable trusts and foundations continued to focus on supporting projects addressing the high cost of living, limiting opportunities to seek grants to provide support to families and individuals, but the Schroder Charity Trust, which has a special interest in supporting advice services, made a further grant towards the running costs of our Helpline.

Berkshire and Thames Valley funders continued to support our work, with the Shanly Foundation and Louis Baylis Charitable Trust both making further grants to our Bear With Me social group. The Walk & Talk group secured grants from the Cumber Family Charitable Trust and the Englefield Charitable Trust.

The Greenham Trust helped to fund the 197 Club social group for autistic adults in Reading, through its Peter Baker grants scheme, while staff at John Lewis's Bracknell distribution centre made a donation of £1,200 through the partnership's Community Matters scheme towards the running costs of our trampolining sessions for autistic children and teenagers in the town.

And Bracknell Town Council, which has been a longstanding supporter of our Helpline service for autistic people and their families, made a further £1,500 grant.

• **Information about how to get involved with fundraising for Autism Berkshire is available on our website or you can get in touch with us at contact@autismberkshire.org.uk**

Thank you

To our funders and supporters

- Amegreen Children's Services
- Ascot Racecourse
- Beech Lodge School
- Berkshire Community Foundation
- Berkshire Masonic Charity
- Bracknell Town Council
- Cadogan Masonic Lodge
- Caversham Masonic Lodge
- Community Impact Bucks
- Cumber Family Charitable Trust
- Englefield Charitable Trust
- Ervin and Nathan Yeung
- Greenham Trust (Peter Baker Grants)
- Heathrow Community Trust
- Jacob Burls
- John Lewis Community Matters
- Louis Baylis (Maidenhead Advertiser) Charitable Trust
- Maidenhead Rotary Club
- Omnia Outsourcing
- PayPal Giving Fund
- Princess Margaret Hospital, Windsor
- Priority Services 4U
- Rotary Club of Pangbourne
- RS Brownless Charitable Trust
- Schroder Charity Trust
- Sebastian Politzer Charitable Settlement
- Shanly Foundation
- Smart CT Business Fives team
- Sophie England
- Stanley Spencer Gallery, Cookham
- Tesco Extra Slough
- This Is U magazine
- University of Reading internship scheme

To our key partners

- Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire & Berkshire West NHS Integrated Care Board
- Frimley NHS Integrated Care Board
- Reading Borough Council

Financial Summary for 2024-25

Total Income	£207,000
Grants and Subscriptions	£199,000
Donations, Legacies & Fundraising	£8,000
Expenditure on Charitable Activities	£227,000
Fundraising Costs	£1,000
Governance Costs	£2,000
Deficit drawn from reserves	£23,000
Reserves carried forward to 2025-26	£68,000

The charity had to draw further on its reserves to balance a reduction in core funding grant availability and to pay for a short-term role of Volunteers' Co-ordinator to develop a group of autistic adult volunteers to support fundraising activities without the associated payroll overhead. This initiative was successful in enrolling six volunteers.



Talking sense about autism.

Autism Berkshire – the working name for Berkshire Autistic Society

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