

Spectrum Women's Autism Group



Annual Report

For the year ending
June 2019

Spectrum Women's Autism Group – Registered Charity in Northern Ireland NIC106799

C/O Spectrum Centre, 14 Northland Row, Dungannon, BT71 6AP

www.womensautism.wordpress.com

Our Purposes and beneficiaries

Our governing document is our constitution which outlines the purposes and beneficiaries of Spectrum Women's Autism Group.

Spectrum Women's Autism Group is established to promote the relief of Autistic women, and their Family and Carers resident in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland through the following:

- i. to promote acceptance and awareness of female presentations of Autism within the general public, relevant professionals and organisations in the private, voluntary and statutory sectors,
- ii. the provision of help, guidance and information to Autistic women members and the promotion of a network of support among such women, with the aim of improving their quality of life and increasing their social networks,
- iii. provision of recreational activities and the promotion of the provision of appropriate recreational facilities to overcome isolation.

Our Services

In setting our objectives and planning our activities for the year the trustees have given careful consideration to the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland's guidance on public benefit to ensure that the activities have helped to achieve the charity's purposes and provide a public benefit to the beneficiaries. We also listen to the feedback from our beneficiaries and try to plan activities that provide a public benefit to them.

I confirm that all the trustees have complied with their duty under charity law to have regard to the Commission's public benefit guidance when exercising any powers or duties to which the guidance is relevant.

One of the main purposes of Spectrum Women's Autism Group, as outlined above is the reduction of social isolation. This is targeted through both a secret Facebook group and face to face meetings. The Facebook group is secret so that only the membership is known to the members, as some members do not feel comfortable with groups where other people can see that they are a member of it. We also have a public Facebook page and website that people can use to link in with the charity. Currently there are 92 members of this group and this number continues rise, with new members being added each month. It aims to provide a safe and supportive space to discuss issues affecting members and to arrange social events. For some members this is the only way they can connect with other members and provides some social interaction.

Spectrum Women's Autism Group's monthly meetings are the core activity of the group. We currently have 18 members registered to attend these meetings and normally have between 10 and 15 in attendance each time. Those members registered to attend the monthly meetings have been asked to pay an annual fee of £20, which can be paid as they can through the year. There is no pressure for anyone to pay and we would never turn someone away if they could not afford to attend. These meetings provide members the opportunity to meet with other autistic women in a relaxed and comfortable fashion. For many of the members this is the only time that they feel that can relax and be themselves and not have to wear a 'mask'. The group meetings are about peer support as we can all use our own experiences to help each other.

C said "I have found my tribe, its a save place for me to be myself and not pretend to be what others want me to be".

A range of activities are covered in these meetings which in the last year have included:

- Wendy Porter was invited to the group to give advice on clothing colours and styling, which is an area of difficulty for many members.
- A talk on autism provided by Joanne Douglas, Consultant and Chartered Psychologist, The Spectrum Diagnostic, Assessment and Therapy Centre. This provided an opportunity to educate ourselves on autism and provide strategies to help ourselves manage the condition.
- A creative writing workshop with Finn Monahan, author of Know Your Spectrum, with the aim of helping members to express themselves. Difficulty with self expression is a common difficulty in autistic people.
- Craft activities including origami, jewellery making and card making. During an activity members are often more comfortable to talk as the expectation of eye contact is removed and provides a starter for conversation. These are difficulties that are common in autism.
- Our annual Christmas party which is opportunity for fun and games, which push members out of their comfort zone but in a supportive environment.
- Talks on mental health issues and ways in which to stay mentally well. Mental health problems, in particular anxiety and depression, are common issues for many autistic women so it is important for members to develop skills to manage the conditions and help prevention of them. The aim is to improve their quality of life.

M said "The support, safe space and companionship that the women's group has offered to me has been incredible, I've been able to learn so much about living with Asperger's. Being able to discuss different aspects of my life with Asperger's while also hearing how it affects others has given me confidence to embrace my differences, not hide them."

Alongside the monthly meetings a range of social outings have been arranged. These include:

- Meetings in a coffee shop to provide and opportunity for chat in a relaxed environment. After this some members would have gone shopping, something which can be challenging for autistic people due to sensory issues, but with the support provided they were able to do so.
- Trips to shows at the Waterfront Hall and Grand Opera House in Belfast, and cinema trips. These can be difficult for autistic people due to sensory issues or simply social isolation and having no one to go with them. We provide support and an opportunity to have others to with them.
- Meals out which can pose challenges for many members, but we provide support to try to overcome these issues. We all understand the issues and accept that we tend to want to eat in the same places and have the same food each time, which other people may perceive as odd.
- We have had trips to the Ulster Museum which provide a social opportunity in an environment that many of the members are comfortable with and can pursue their interests.

B said “since my daughter has been involved in the group she has really grown in confidence and maturity. Previously she only had one friend, but through the group she now has a whole group of friends and an active social calendar. Her knowledge and understanding of autism has grown and she now shares and uses her experiences to help others.”

In terms of our aim to educate others on the female presentation of autism, a small group of the trustees and members met with Marie McCloy from the Empower Project. The Empower Project have had increasing numbers of autistic girls in their service and we were able to provide strategies and ideas of how they could best support them. The trustees are fully committed to educating others on the female presentation of autism and will do so in their day to lives when the opportunities arise. We believe that through educating on autism that the lives of all autistic women can be improved, beyond those involved with Spectrum Women's Autism Group.

Risk of harm and private benefit

By the nature of the charity being based on peer support there is a private benefit in terms of support and social benefits, not financial, to the trustees, but this is incidental to the public benefit.

The trustees recognise that there may be a risk of psychological harm from the issues that may come up for discussion. We have the support of a Consultant and Chartered Psychologist who

provides support to the charity. As part of our membership registration form we have next of kin details that we can contact if there is a significant concern. Attendees at the groups are made aware of the main topic of discussion in advance and can choose not to attend if it is something that they can not deal with at that time. Every effort is made in the planning of the group activities to minimise the risk of harm.

I confirm that there are no serious incidents or other matters that the trustees should have brought to the Commission's attention.

Charity Trustees as of end June 2019

Miss Deborah Anne Bond	Chair
Mrs Amanda Wales	Treasurer
Mrs Karen Elizabeth Tighe	Secretary
Mrs Clare Amanda McCleary	Membership Secretary
Dr Margaret Elizabeth Copeland	Ordinary member
Mrs Jennifer Lorraine Matchett	Ordinary member

Other Charity Trustees in the year to June 2019

Miss Kathryn Helen McArdle	Had to stand down in January 2019 for personal reasons
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Deborah Bond, Chair



Amanda Wales, Treasurer