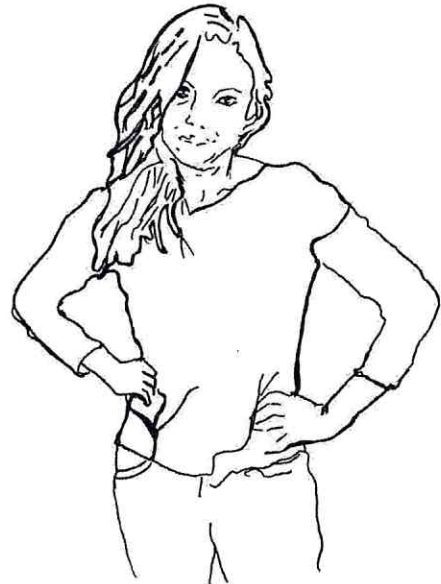


Spectrum Women's Autism Group



Annual Report

For the year ending
June 2023

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 WhatsApp group and face to face meetings. The WhatsApp group is only open to registered members of the charity that attend the face-to-face meetings. This has the advantage of being a small group in which everyone knows each other, which means that members are happy to share things and get support and a way for people to keep in touch and to arrange online meetings. Occasionally we have zoom online meetings during the winter months to accommodate the weather and where travel from all over Northern Ireland is restricted.

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The Spectrum Women's Autism Group's monthly meetings are the core activity of the group. We currently have 115 on our register. Monthly attendance at meetings are around between 12-15 members. Those members registered to attend the monthly meetings have been asked to pay an annual fee of £20, which is payable from end June each year. During Covid we waived this payment. 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 atmosphere. For many of the members this is the only time that they feel that they can relax and be themselves and not have to 'mask' (which is often the case socialising with the neurotypical community). The group meetings are about providing peer support, advice, learning from our own experiences to help each other, having group discussions on topics related to all areas of living with Autism and providing an environment where friendships can be formulated. We also have a facilitator from the Spectrum Centre, Dungannon (Jo Douglas) who helps us to navigate our meetings and open discussions about our worries and difficulties we face, during our day to day lives. This is a vital contribution to our group.

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

- A discussion session on 'Autism in The Workplace' facilitated by Joanne Douglas, Consultant Chartered Psychologist, The Spectrum Diagnostic, Assessment and Therapy Centre. The session considered the many positive contributions individuals with autism can bring to the workplace as well as some of the challenges imposed as the result of open plan workplaces, sensory issues, communication difficulties, group activities and meetings, organisational skills and planning etc. The group was able to share personal experiences in a non-judgemental environment and to discuss a range of strategies to promote positive experiences in the workplace.
- 'Songs that mean something to me' – In this session, group members were encouraged to choose and play a song/ songs that have a special meaning to them and to share their stories around this with others in the group. This fun session encouraged the group to develop their communication skills, to talk about feelings and emotions etc.
- Our annual Christmas party provided an opportunity for fun and games, which pushed members out of their comfort zone but in a supportive environment. This get together also involved some arts and crafts activities facilitated by one of our group members who lead the session in making 3D Christmas Cards.
- A discussion session on identifying individual strengths and challenges was facilitated by Joanne Douglas, Consultant Chartered Psychologist, The Spectrum Diagnostic, Assessment and Therapy Centre. This session encouraged group members to discuss the positive aspects of their autism diagnosis along with the aspects which they find most challenging. Within the non-judgemental, supportive group setting members were encouraged to share their personal experiences and discuss similarities and differences in individual presentations.

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- On International Women's Day the group celebrated their neurodiversity as women on the spectrum and got together to enjoy a jewellery making session led by one of the group members. The session encouraged members to celebrate their differences while providing an opportunity to develop their creativity and imagination in designing and making a personal piece of jewellery which they could take home.
- A discussion session on 'ASD and Trauma' was facilitated by Joanne Douglas, Consultant Chartered Psychologist, The Spectrum Diagnostic, Assessment and Therapy Centre. This session explored what causes trauma, signs and symptoms, the impact on daily life, diagnosis and assessment and different types of treatment and support. There was a focus on trauma within the context of having an autistic spectrum disorder. Within the non-judgemental, supportive group setting members were encouraged to share their personal experiences and ask questions to develop their knowledge about this very important and relevant topic.
- A discussion session on 'ASD – The Female Perspective' was facilitated by Joanne Douglas, Consultant Chartered Psychologist, The Spectrum Diagnostic, Assessment and Therapy Centre. This session encouraged discussion about the female presentation of autism and included topics such as masking, regulating emotions, navigating relationships etc.
- Questions in a fishbowl, which allowed members to ask anonymous questions about anything related to their autism. This format allowed members to ask questions that they would be too embarrassed to ask in person. The discussion often helped others as the issues were often common to many in the group.
- A discussion session on 'Being Kind to Your ~Mind' was facilitated by Joanne Douglas, Consultant Chartered Psychologist, The Spectrum Diagnostic, Assessment and Therapy Centre. This session encouraged discussion around the promotion of positive mental health, positive thinking, and the law of attraction.

Alongside the monthly meetings a range of social outings have been arranged. These social events facilitate group members to attend meet ups, conferences, social events, and cultural experiences that they would perhaps not be able to attend alone. They enrich the social opportunities for group members and help to build confidence, as well as opportunities to develop social and communication skills in a range of settings and people. These included:

- Meetings in a coffee shop to provide an 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.
- 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.

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- Several members attended the Middletown Autism Conference at the ICC Belfast – hosted by a range of professionals in the field of autism. Topics included 'Pathological Demand Avoidance', Neurodiversity, Social and Communication Skills.
- Several members attended a Christmas by Candlelight at St Ann's Cathedral – a night of musical entertainment featuring the soundtracks from a range of popular Christmas movies – Home Alone, Love Actually etc.
- A group of members also attended the Belfast Community Concert in the Waterfront.
- Some members also attended the christening of a group member's twin daughters and celebrated with refreshments afterwards.
- A group of members also attended the Big Day Out Women's empowerment day at the Armagh City Hotel.
- We continue to meet our aim which is to formally educate others on the female presentation of autism. The trustees and members of SWAG 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. Clare Thompson, one of our online members through her work with creative therapies has shared her personal experience of having autism on her blog.

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 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. Included on the form is a code of conduct, which includes treating every member with respect and dignity and to respect the confidentiality of the group. 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 cannot 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 2023

Chair: Dr Margaret Copeland

Treasurer: Mrs Clare Amanda McCleary

Secretary: Ms Fiona Monaghan

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Copeland', written over a horizontal line.

Dr Margaret Copeland, Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. McCleary', written over a horizontal line.

Treasurer.