

DASH Autism Matters Conference Sept 2022

My Voice Matters

A volunteer briefing based on lived experience.

My Voice Matters is ensuring the voice of people with diverse lived experiences and backgrounds are heard.

We are proud to be able to give the opportunity for seldom heard voices to be heard by providers and wider organisations in their own words.

This briefing has been researched and written by Zee Jones a Healthwatch Swindon volunteer outlining her experiences of the Autism Matters Conference hosted by DASH on 21st September 2022.

Introduction

As someone who was diagnosed with autism just before the pandemic, I didn't have the chance to learn what is available to support neurodivergent people, especially in Swindon where I live. But now that things are gradually getting back to normal in regards to accessing services around Swindon, I finally have the chance to better understand myself and autism in general.

Through a lovely, endlessly helpful and supportive lady called Claire, -who works for [Building Bridges](#)- I came to learn of an event centred around autism and my interest was immediately piqued, I spoke to the Healthwatch Swindon team and agreed to produce a report about my experience of the day and what I learnt.

The Conference and first impressions.

The event itself was held over two separate days; Wednesday 21st September and Saturday 24th September with both days consisting of a day-long conference. The conferences were organised and hosted by [DASH](#); a local Swindon charity based in Sanford house that aims to support those who are on the autistic spectrum.

DASH offers a few different services including an information and advice service for adults on the spectrum, which can range from health and welfare rights to debt and employment. DASH also hosts a range of social groups for 18+; all of which are relatively small groups which, of course, is a very desirable feature for many autistic people.

Both conferences were hosted at Haydon Wick Parish Council; a small, though not crowded, building that was well suited for the event with toilets available plus a small side room where DASH was selling some treats and items crafted by service users.

Upon arriving, we were greeted by the friendly faces of the DASH team who directed us where to go once we had signed in, and invited us to help ourselves to tea, coffee, squash and biscuits, which remained available throughout the day. We were free to pick our own seats so long as they hadn't been reserved, and waiting for us on each seat was a little welcome pack. Within the pack were some very helpful pieces of information including; brochures regarding the organisations speaking at the event, a copy of the conference agenda plus an evaluation form to complete anonymously at the end of the day.

When everyone had settled in their seats, we were welcomed and given a quick rundown of the day's timetable- including information on breaks and the completely free buffet-style lunch- and also an explanation of what would happen should the fire alarm go off.

Once we were welcomed by DASH, the first speaker was introduced and took the proverbial stage.

Session One: Oaks & Furrows

The very first organisation that we heard from was [Oak & Furrows](#)- an independent branch of the RSPCA- who told us all about what they do and the many benefits for neurodiverse people in regards to working so closely with animals, such as; having a steady routine during working hours, gaining the chance to have a sense of responsibility which they may not have in their home life for various reasons and the satisfaction of seeing animals in various states get better and being in part responsible for that wonderful development.

We were also informed of a few volunteers and their stories; how working with Oak & Furrows has taught them a lot about various things, including patience, confidence and caring for another life form.

Oak & Furrows do a lot more than just work with and support autistic people, their main focus is, after all, helping animals which they do both via fundraising at their network of charity shops and also at their wildlife rescue centre near Cricklade.

Session Two: DisAbility Experts C.I.C

Second up was Martin Kelly, the founder of [DisAbility Experts C.I.C](#), which is a company based on the thought that “everybody should have the chance to succeed and that having a disability should not prevent that”, a mindset that would certainly tremendously improve the world in general if everyone had it.

DisAbility Experts C.I.C work hard to help those with various disabilities to move forward in life, whether that be through providing training on one of their offered courses or simply sitting down with a service user and helping them to figure out what their skills are and what they would like to do with those skills in the future.

Although the company is based on John Street in Swindon, due to the wonder of technology they can offer online courses regardless of a person’s location.



I have to say that I was very impressed with how down-to-Earth Martin was during his time talking to us; he was relaxed and open about his own past and unfortunate experience with discrimination based on his own disability.



Although I didn’t personally speak to him, he is certainly the type of person that even I, someone who struggles socially, could see myself being happy and comfortable working with as a service user.

Session Three: National Police Autism Association

After a short break, we heard from one of the coordinators of the [National Police Autism Association](#), that although “autism” is in the name, it is not the only neurodiverse condition that the Association supports.

The National Police Autism Association supports those within the police service who are either neurodivergent themselves or have close contact with someone who is neurodivergent, such as a team member or family member. Anyone who works for the police is welcome, regardless of rank or position in the service.

For members of the National Police Autism Association, there exists something called the Police Neurodiversity Forum which is an online service where those who have questions, or would like to simply observe others' questions and conversations regarding neurodiversity, can go to do just that in a safe and helpful way.

The National Police Autism Association is, as the name suggests, a nationwide service, not just Swindon based so anyone who is a member of the police, regardless of where they are based can join and find the support that they may not be aware is there for them.

Session Four: Shared Lives

Before lunch, we heard from a duo representing the Swindon branch of [Shared Lives](#) which is based on Upham Road. Shared Lives is a service that provides support and accommodation for adults with various disabilities, mental health conditions, older people and other vulnerable adults.

There are a few different ways in which Shared Lives can offer help, from short day breaks to long-term live-in support and options in between. Though, as a rule, Shared Lives do not automatically accept every single person who applies as that wouldn't work; they carefully consider their applicants through a match-making process during which they weigh up the person's individual needs against the services and carers they can provide.

Unfortunately, a match cannot always be made but they certainly try their best to provide accommodation and support where possible for them.

Session Five: Swindon SEND Families Voice

After a buffet-style lunch full of enough treats to more than satisfy those present; guests and speakers alike, we heard from [Swindon SEND Families Voice](#).

Swindon SEND Families Voice is a voluntary group of parents and carers who have children with various Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) who aim to work with parents and carers to make sure that the SEND services provided in Swindon actually meet the needs and requirements of SEND children and their families.

There are a lot of ways that Swindon SEND Families Voice provide help and support such as; focus groups, signposting to other services which may be of help, providing support via phone, email and social media plus many other ways. The service is for anyone with a child or young person aged 0-25 with special needs or disabilities.

Session Six: Dressability

Last but certainly not least by any stretch of the imagination, a representative from [Dressability](#) stepped up to talk to us all about how they provide a very important service to those with various disabilities and mobility impairments.

Dressability is a charity based in Westmead that adjusts items of clothing to better suit the needs of the customer. We were actually shown some samples of items that they regularly do, all of which were immaculately sewn and held to very high standards.



I'm pretty confident when I say that everyone present at the conference was beyond impressed by the craftsmanship and ingenuity shown to us.



From adding hidden zips to t-shirts to make it easier for those with mobility issues to get dressed, to replacing buttons on school shirts with magnets or velcro so that those who struggle with their fine motor skills can do up their own shirt after PE, all while keeping the buttons permanently sewn to the shirt to add the illusion of a standard school shirt and not make the user's difference visible to their fellow students.

Dressability has also made entire items from scratch and to the exact specifications of their client where needed even if it means making multiple versions until they get it right.

Although they are based in Westmead with disabled access if required, Dressability can offer an outreach service to those who cannot travel, where they will travel to the client so long as they are within Swindon or the surrounding areas.

And for those on a tight budget, their pricing is very reasonable considering the pure skill and time that goes into every single adaptation.

Final thoughts

Although I personally only attended the Wednesday date, so I cannot speak for the Saturday experience,



I found the conference to be wonderful. The atmosphere was calm and friendly, which as an autistic person I greatly appreciated and I am certain that I wasn't the only person present to have felt that way.



The event was well organised and run by a lovely team of ladies who were all very welcoming and did their best to talk to everyone individually and make us feel comfortable.

I came out of the conference with pages of notes and information; admittedly, it is not all suited to me and my specific circumstances but I can definitely see and appreciate the tremendous help it would be to others.

Honestly, I hadn't been aware that there is a fair amount of support in Swindon for autistic people, the problem itself comes down to both making these services publicly known, especially to those who could benefit from them, and also funding. Unfortunately, there isn't as much government funding as there should be when we consider just how many people have an autism diagnosis, leaving many services struggling to raise the necessary funds to provide such much-needed support. Though, even if government funding can be secured, it tends to leave services stuck in a box and unable to fully help their service users in the ways they may need to unless they want to risk losing funding entirely.

A lot still needs to be done to support those with autism, raise awareness and eradicate harmful stereotypes and misinformation attached to autism, but places like DASH and those involved with the conference are definitely taking steps in the right direction.



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