

AUTISM INITIATIVES NORTHERN IRELAND

TRUSTEES' REPORT (INCLUDING DIRECTOR'S REPORT) FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

The trustees present their annual report and financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2025.

The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the accounting policies set out in note 1 to the financial statements and comply with the charity's governing document, the Companies Act 2006 and "Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) (effective 1 January 2019)".

Objectives and activities

The charity's objectives as set out in the objects contained in the company's memorandum of association, are:

"To meet the needs of people with autism, their families and carers throughout Northern Ireland by providing a comprehensive range of services which are personal, professional and innovative."

The charity aims:

- To promote and protect the physical and mental health of persons who have autism spectrum conditions through the provision of financial assistance, support, education and practical advice and to advance the education of the general public in all areas relating to autism.
- To relieve persons who have autism spectrum conditions by the provision of carers and by the provision of support and training to such carers.
- To develop the capacity and skills of persons who have autism spectrum conditions in such a way that they are better able to identify, and help meet, their needs and to participate more fully in society.

Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland was established in 2002 and is a subsidiary of Autism Initiatives Group. The main aim of the charity is to provide care and support for people with autism, who may also have associated learning disabilities or mental health problems.

As with its parent charity, Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland undertakes periodic and comprehensive reviews, not only in the areas of care and support, but in all areas of management and financial controls.

Services in Northern Ireland include:

- Supported living
- Day opportunities activities
- Outreach support
- Floating housing support

Strategies for achieving aims and objectives

The charity aims to work in partnership with all people supported, helping them to develop successful and independent communication skills, according to individual strengths, needs and preferences, within a total communication environment. Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland offers a learning opportunity to each person, addressing the areas of communication, social interaction and flexibility of thought, which has regard for their personal goals. It is the overall objective to make people feel good about themselves and raise their self-esteem. This enables each individual to enjoy more successes at a level achievable for them and so take greater pleasure in life.

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Public benefit

The trustees have referred to the guidance contained in the Charity Commission's general guidance on public benefit when reviewing the charity's aims and objectives and in planning its future activities.

How our activities deliver public benefit

The charitable activities focus on meeting the needs of people with autism spectrum conditions and are undertaken to further the charitable purposes of public benefit.

Autism is found in people of all ages, regions, countries and societies. Equal access to its services is an important issue for the charity. Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland has an equal opportunity policy and diversity statement, which ensures that the charity has a culture, which is reinforced via its robust training program, which ensures equality of access to the services by gender, disability and sexual orientation. The charity believe equal access to the services is vital to its success, and that successful outcomes must be shared by all communities that use the services.

Employment policies

The employees of Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland are its most important resource since their performance determines the quality of services provided. The employees have made a significant contribution to the continued success of Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland. Each year significant training is undertaken to ensure employees reach and maintain the skills required enabling them to perform effectively, this include specific autism training. All employees are encouraged to study for a vocational qualification with the support of the organisation. In accordance with Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland equal opportunities policy, the organisation has long established fair employment practices in the recruitment, selection, retention and training of staff with disabilities.

Disabled persons

Applications for employment by disabled persons are always fully considered, bearing in mind the aptitudes of the applicant concerned. In the event of members of staff becoming disabled, every effort is made to ensure that their employment within the charity continues and that the appropriate training is arranged. It is the policy of the charity that the training, career development and promotion of disabled persons should, as far as possible, be identical to that of other employees.

Employee involvement

The charity's policy is to consult and discuss with employees, through unions, staff councils and at meetings, matters likely to affect employees' interests.

Information of matters of concern to employees is given through information bulletins and reports which seek to achieve a common awareness on the part of all employees of the financial and economic factors affecting the group's performance.

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Achievements and performance

Recruitment and retention remain a key focus for the HR team. The HR team implemented several innovative solutions to assist with talent attraction and staff retention throughout the 2024/2025 financial year.

We have a small labour pool in Northern Ireland, compared with the UK, and our unemployment rates are low. Therefore, most of our talent pool will be individuals who are already in employment, making it essential that AINI are attractive to applicants and an employer of choice.

- Careers Fair / Recruitment event plan: We have an extensive, proactive plan of events scheduled for each financial year. This includes our presence and interaction with potential candidates and promoting our career opportunities and AINI throughout the year.
- We developed new recruitment leaflets to distribute at events and are linking with the Marketing team for recruitment stands with QR codes, ensuring applicants have instant access to our application packs.
- We have also promoted our Culture of Recognition, our Core Values and Staff benefits offerings, to hopefully assist with our talent attraction and staff retention.
- We have developed our working relationship with Queens University Belfast, extending our year placement opportunities for students. In 2024 our student placement won the Queens University student of the year Award.
- Career Pathway – We are committed to internal career progression and upskilling our teams in Northern Ireland to progress, where possible. A number of our current managers started as Supporters and have worked their way through to Service Manager or Area Manager posts. The HR team are working on reviewing our career pathway, which will show a clear career progression route and how our operational succession planning operates in AINI. We hope to share this updated pathway on our social media, to assist with talent attraction and staff retention.

Throughout the 2024/25 financial year, Learning and Development in AINI have been delivering and facilitating our training plan, in liaison with the Autism Initiatives Group. The focus is ensuring staff are adequately trained to carry out their job roles and ensuring compliance with legislative and regulatory training requirements. Monthly and quarterly statistics are provided to senior management accordingly.

The HR team devised a comprehensive HR Bitesize leadership development programme for managers, to support them in their job role. Roll out of the bitesize programme started in 2025 and will continue into 2026. The programme covers various aspects of HR and people management, related to their job roles to support them manage their teams effectively.

The HR team are committed to promoting our equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives and showcasing our commitment to this. We introduced several initiatives during this financial year including participation at Belfast Pride.

Linked to our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) plans, we developed a Menopause guidance document for managers, to support the people we support and staff, who maybe experiencing menopause symptoms in the workplace.

EDI continues to be a focus for the 2025/2026 financial year.

Extension of trainers: To focus more on the operational needs of the services, an emphasis was placed on attracting more internal trainers and our Area Managers delivering less training. One member of the HR team resigned due to the cost of childcare; however, the HR team were able to offer this person the opportunity to deliver training (Performance Management and Core Skills), topics related to their HR practical knowledge and qualifications and training. This was a win for the Organisation who was able to retain talent and offer flexible working opportunities, as part of our Equality aims and a positive for the employee, who was able to remain in the workplace.

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Our Health & Wellbeing Lead worked directly with individuals and their Key Workers to promote healthier lifestyles and social inclusion. A standout example involved two men expressing an interest in playing pool, which led to them meeting in a local pool hall. Following a social media post, European Pool Champions Nathan Moore and Conrad McCann offered to provide coaching. This led to participation in autism-friendly pool competitions. Alongside individual work, the Health & Wellbeing Lead delivered staff training in mindfulness, meditation, and healthy eating. The success of Year 1 of this role has supported a commitment to funding for a further two years.

September 2024 saw the success of our first formal event, co-produced with people we support and staff across services. Described as "a room filled with joy," it brought together individuals from Supported Living and Community Outreach across Northern Ireland. The positive response has led to the inclusion of similar events later in the year and into 25/26. A full programme of smaller wellbeing and social activities continues, including Christmas, Valentine and Easter Crafting events in Belfast.

Two team members received sector recognition at the CO3 Awards. One member (Health & Wellbeing Lead) was Highly Commended for Leading Workplace Wellbeing, while our other staff member was a finalist in the Leading Inclusion and Diversity category. These honours reflect our commitment to staff-led innovation and inclusive leadership.

At the Arc NI 25th Anniversary Conference in March 2025, we facilitated a creative workshop on healthy eating. One of the people we support, co-led the session as our Expert by Experience. His outstanding contribution led to an invitation to join TILLI (Tell It Like It Is), where he now attends weekly and is encouraging others to take part. His involvement exemplifies our inclusive, empowerment-based approach to service delivery.

Financial review

Total incoming resources in the year ended 31st March 2025 were £8.5m (£8.1m 2024), an increase of £0.4m over the previous year. Resources expended in the period, were £8.5m (2024: £8.1m) resulting in a deficit of £18k (2024: surplus of £24k).

The balance sheet remains healthy with net assets of £4.3m.

Reserves policy

The trustees consider the charity's free reserves policy on a regular basis. Now more than ever the trustees are aware that the Charity needs to maintain sufficient reserves to allow it to, not only meet future known commitments and liabilities, but also to absorb unforeseen setbacks and to react to change or take advantage of opportunities.

The trustees also consider it important to be able to continue to advance the work of the Charity by continuous programmes of research and development into its operations. Given this, the trustees consider that a target amount of between three to six months of core expenditure should ideally be maintained as free reserves to ensure the above and to give the reassurance to beneficiaries and funders. Based on the financial statements to 31 March 2025 this would equate to committing to build a level of free reserves in the long term of circa £4.3m (2024: £4m).

The trustees define the level of free reserves at any time to be the total of all undesignated unrestricted reserves less the book value of fixed assets, net of any long term loans. As at 31 March 2025 free reserves were £2.1m (2024: £2.3m) in the charity in addition to reserves held as designated in AIG for the benefit of subsidiary charities. The trustees are aware that the level of free reserves in the charity falls short of the aspirational target that they have set, even when considering any free reserves that may be available to them in AIG, but they are fully committed to working towards this goal in the long term.

The charity is a subsidiary of Autism Initiatives Group ('AIG'). A charity in its own right, AIG's principal objective is to continue to advance and improve the work that is delivered by its members through programmes of continuous research, development and investment into all areas of operations. In order to advance this, AIG seeks donations from its subsidiary charities. Donations received are held in designated reserves in AIG to fund research and development for the benefit of subsidiary charities of the Group.

Principal funding sources

The principal source of funding for the charity is fee income from statutory bodies for clients cared for by the charity.

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Investment policy

The charity has the power to invest funds not immediately required for its general purposes in such investments as it deems fit for purpose.

The charities investment objectives are to:

- Generate income to further the objectives of the charity
- Safeguard the assets and business continuity of the charity
- Comply with the conditions attached to restricted funds
- Ensure working capital and restricted funds are always readily available in cash
- Meet the requirements of the reserves policy and the strategic plan whilst ensuring that the trustees fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities concerning investments without exceeding their powers of investment.

The charities policy continues to be to maintain cash deposits rather than to invest in stocks and shares, property (other than for the charities general purposes) or any other investment. This policy is kept under review.

Major risks

The trustees has assessed the major risks to which the charity is exposed, and are satisfied that systems are in place to mitigate exposure to the major risks.

The trustees are committed to adopting best practice in the identification, evaluation and cost effective control of risks, to ensure that the charities exposure is minimised or eliminated where possible.

In order to identify, and manage risks a dedicated committee is in place, to which trustees, senior management and senior staff all contribute.

Principal areas of risk identified as a result of the processes in place include:

Financial risk

The highest risk identified is the impact of the current economic climate on revenue streams from statutory bodies and the effect of external influences and legislation on its ability to manage costs. To manage this risk a stringent budgeting procedure has been established to identify and maximise all income streams and to tightly manage cost control. In addition an ongoing programme of reviewing and updating the entire organisations operation procedures and policies has commenced.

Operational risk

Ensuring the provision of its services to the many people affected by ASC who are served by the charity remains of the highest order. Quality assurance is given the highest priority within the charity, services are subject to external inspection from regulatory bodies, and contract compliance reviews. Internally the quality assurance manager, coordinates peer reviews and internal inspection and reviews.

Health and Safety

A detailed plan of assessments, training and reviews has been developed and implemented to ensure the physical risk of injury or liability to any person supported, staff member or member of the public when assessing the charities facilities or services is minimised.

In addition to the above a detailed risk register is kept and reviewed by the trustees and they are satisfied that the systems in place manage exposure to the major risks identified.

Business continuity plans exist for every major service area and these are reviewed regularly.

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Plans for future periods

We aim to open our first Short Breaks service in Northern Ireland in November 2025. This small-scale pilot project will provide essential respite opportunities for autistic individuals and their families, while also allowing us to evaluate and refine our approach in this region. The service will offer flexible, needs-led support in a safe and autism-friendly environment, filling a critical gap identified by families and professionals. Success of this pilot will inform future regional rollouts and help establish a sustainable model of short break provision.

Work is currently underway to source a new premises for the Belfast Resource Centre, with the aspiration to mirror the highly successful model of our Bristol Avenue Resource Centre in Blackpool. This strategic move will be supported by the appointment of a dedicated Area Manager for Community Services in Northern Ireland, whose focus will be to lead the development of the Resource Centre and expand our outreach offer. The new centre will enhance access to autism-informed activities, skills development, and social opportunities for individuals across the Greater Belfast area.

In order to further embed autism-specific expertise across our services, we will introduce two new key roles: a Regional Autism Practice Lead and an Autism Support Practitioner, both to be in post by October 2025. These roles will strengthen our practice leadership capacity, promote evidence-informed approaches, and support teams to deliver consistently high-quality support. This development will not only enhance outcomes for the people we support but also differentiate our organisation from other providers in the region, strengthening our reputation for excellence and giving us a clear competitive edge.

Structure, governance and management

Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland is a company limited by guarantee and is governed by its Memorandum and Articles of Association incorporated on 17th July 2003. Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland is registered with the Charities Commission, number 104641.

The trustees, who are also the directors for the purpose of company law, and who served during the year and up to the date of signature of the financial statements were:

Ms R Bailey	(Resigned 23 April 2025)
Mr C Duffy	(Appointed 18 October 2024)
Dr J Harshaw	(Resigned 6 June 2025)
Ms J Hoferkova	(Appointed 18 October 2024)
Mr A McAvoy	(Resigned 29 January 2025)
Mr J McCarthy	
Mr B P Nolan	(Appointed 18 October 2024)
Mrs V N Spence	(Appointed 18 October 2024)
Mr B E Williams	

Recruitment and appointment of trustees

Trustees give their time voluntarily and receive no benefits from the charity. Trustees work within the code of conduct and good practice as set out by the Charities Commission.

The Charity aims to maintain a diverse mix of skills and experience within the Board of Trustees that supports the governance and management of the charity. New trustees undertake an induction and training programme.

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Risk management

The trustees have a risk management strategy that comprises of:

- A yearly review of the risks that the charity may face
- A system of establishing the high risk factors and a procedure to mitigate the risk
- The implementation of procedures designed to minimise any potential impact on the charity should those risks materialise

This work is ongoing and the particular formulation of the risks identified through the procedure allow for the contingency plans to be drawn up through the identified risk procedure, the main focuses being corporate risk. The charity also has a robust risk management procedure that looks at the direct risks faced by the individuals that are supported directly by the charity.

Qualifying third party indemnity provisions

All trustees are covered by the group directors and officers insurance.

Executive management

The Chief Executive of Autism Initiatives Group, Andrew Grainger, has global responsibility for all group operations, including the implementation of the policy and strategic direction of the organisation. The Chief Executive is the interface between the governance and management functions of the organisation.

The Chief Executive has an executive management team with all directors having specific responsibilities in their own area that they form the executive group advising on the corporate and strategic direction of the organisation, reporting directly to the Chief Executive.

Organisational structure

The Director of Operations, Adele Leighton, is line managed by the Chief Executive of Autism Initiatives Group. The Chairperson of Autism Initiatives Group, Brian Williams and Andrew Grainger are directors on the Board and are the representative from Autism Initiatives Group on the Board of Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland.

Remuneration policy

The Board of Trustees is responsible for reviewing the pay of the senior executive staff. The Board periodically benchmark against pay levels in other comparable organisations of a similar size, with the support of external advice as required.

Other matters

Business planning

The three year business plan, which is revisited on a regular basis, is based on a detailed review of the charity, its aims and its objectives and provides the framework based on the core values, through which the organisation is managed. The plan provides a clear statement of the current position and how the charity will overcome any challenges it may face and critically, continue to meet the needs of the individuals the charity supports, their families and other partners.

The current plan is based on an understanding both of the needs of individuals with autism, their carers, other partners and the charity resources and lays out the key issues and objectives for the future.

Auditor

DSG resigned as auditor on 11 September 2024 due to an internal reorganisation. On the same day, DSG Audit Limited was appointed to continue the audit engagement without interruption. This change reflects a legal restructuring of the audit firm and does not affect the scope or continuity of the audit engagement.

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Disclosure of information to auditor

Each of the trustees has confirmed that there is no information of which they are aware which is relevant to the audit, but of which the auditor is unaware. They have further confirmed that they have taken appropriate steps to identify such relevant information and to establish that the auditor is aware of such information.

Small company provisions

This report has been prepared in accordance with the provisions applicable to companies subject to the small companies regime.

The trustees' report was approved by the Board of Trustees.



Ms J Hoferkova
Trustee

6 August 2025



Mr B P Nolan
Trustee