

All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism
2019 Annual General Meeting minutes
Tuesday 29 October



Attendees:

Rt Hon Dame Cheryl Gillan MP

John Howell MP

The Baroness Hollins

The Rt Hon the Lord Touhig

The Rt Hon the Lord Warner

The Lord Clement-Jones

Huw Merriman MP

Teresa Pearce MP

Tim Nicholls & David MacKenzie – The National Autistic Society, Secretariat to the APPGA

Welcome from the Chair

Dame Cheryl welcomed attendees to the meeting. She stated that because MPs were debating legislation proposing a General Election that afternoon, this would have to be a short meeting of the Group, involving the formal processes of the AGM, a look back at the work the APPGA has done in the previous year, and a discussion about the programme of work for the year ahead.

2018/2019 Report from the Chair

Dame Cheryl opened by saying that she was very pleased with the work that the APPGA had carried out in the past year, and that this work had been truly cross-party, which she believed to be one of the most valuable attributes of the Group.

She highlighted that the biggest piece of work the APPGA had carried out in the past year was the inquiry into the Autism Act. This was the biggest inquiry that the APPGA had ever carried out, involving six evidence sessions held in Parliament and a national survey, which received responses from over 11,000 autistic people and their families across England. She stated that the subsequent report found that despite there being many improvements since the introduction of the Act, there is still not enough support for autistic people and their families, and more needs to be done locally and nationally to make sure that the Autism Act makes a difference to all autistic people in the country. She said these findings were outlined in *The Autism Act; 10 Years On* report which was published in September, which contained a number of recommendations for the Government on what they should include in the refreshed Autism Strategy, due to be published in the coming months.

Dame Cheryl also talked about the Understanding Autism sessions for MPs that the APPGA organised in May. These proved to be very popular, with 82 MPs taking part. She stated her desire to see these sessions expanded so that more MPs, Lords and parliamentary staff can take part.

Lord Touhig highlighted that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which both he and Dame Cheryl are members of, will be doing an investigation on autism, which will possibly involve a visit to the UK. He said that this could be something that the APPGA could be involved in in the year ahead. Dame Cheryl

acknowledged this and congratulated Lord Touhig on the work he has done in this area.

Election of the Chair and Officers

- Dame Cheryl was re-elected as Chair of the APPGA.
- Lord Touhig and Jonathon Reynolds were re-elected as Vice Chairs.
- Dr Lisa Cameron MP, Thangam Debbonaire MP, Huw Merriman MP, Christina Rees MP, Cat Smith MP, Lord Warner, Baroness Hollins, and Lord Sterling were all re-elected as Officers.
- Marion Fellows MP and John Howell MP were also elected as Officers.

Income and expenditure statement

The statement was unanimously approved by the Group and signed by Dame Cheryl.

Programme of work priorities for the year ahead

Dame Cheryl stated that the Government were due to publish the refreshed autism strategy by the end of this year. However, given that a December General Election was now likely to be taking place, this will be delayed until a new Government is in place. She stressed the importance of ensuring that the APPGA's work in the year ahead focussed on making sure that the strategy, and the related implementation plan, reflect the recommendations made in the APPGA report.

Lord Clement-Jones welcomed the report, but asked about how the APPGA could ensure that the many recommendations in it will be implemented. Dame Cheryl said that she had written to the relevant Secretaries of State to highlight the recommendations in the report, and had also met with some of them in person. She reiterated the importance of ensuring that the APPGA focuses on making sure the refreshed autism strategy reflects the report's recommendations.

Baroness Hollins stated that she was bringing forward a Private Member's Bill aiming to introduce mandatory training in autism for all health and social care staff, and that she would be grateful if the APPGA could support this. Dame Cheryl said that the APPGA would be happy to do so. She also stated that, with the General Election imminent, the Group should look for opportunities to amend the new Government's legislation where possible to try to implement the recommendations in the Autism Act report.

Lord Warner highlighted the issue of local government funding, and the fact that all too often the discussion around this focusses on older people and child protection. He stated that getting a diagnosis remains a big problem, and that there remains a financial disincentive to provide an autism diagnosis, as well as problems in the level of staffing in these services. Dame Cheryl agreed and added that these issues were not always a direct result of a lack of funding, but the absence of training in autism for professionals working in the field.

Lord Warner also highlighted the lack of respite services available to parents and carers of autistic people and the need for better use of direct payments, which

Dame Cheryl acknowledged was a problem in her own constituency. Lord Warner agreed to lead the APPGA's work in this area.

Huw Merriman MP asked whether the APPGA should be feeding in to the work of the Palace of Westminster's Restoration and Renewal team to ensure that the parliamentary estate is accessible for autistic people. Dame Cheryl said that she had recently met with the team carrying out this work to discuss this, and that they were very receptive. She highlighted the importance of ensuring that all staff on the estate had sufficient autism training, stating that her own staff member Lorraine O'Shea had undertaken online autism training, which had been of great benefit. Dame Cheryl suggested that Huw Merriman take up this piece of work, to which he agreed.

Lord Touhig highlighted the autism employment gap and the need to address this. Dame Cheryl agreed that this was a big problem where improvements had not been made, and suggested Lord Touhig lead the APPGA's work in this area to which he agreed.

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Dame Cheryl paid tribute to the work that the Rt Hon Sir Norman Lamb, who is standing down as an MP at the upcoming General Election, had carried out for the APPGA during his time as an MP.

Margaret Laurie from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) highlighted that they will be publishing a POSTnote on autism, which will update their work from 2008. It will outline changes in awareness and research and examine the extent to which these have improved service provision for autistic people.

Dame Cheryl closed the meeting by thanking everyone for attending. She also wanted to particularly thank her staff member Lorraine O'Shea for her work supporting the APPGA, and to the National Autistic Society for the support they provide as the Secretariat. She highlighted the important role that the APPGA Advisory Group plays in providing support to members.

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