

**Chairman's Report
for the Annual General Meeting
of Disability Huntingdonshire (DISH)
17TH November, 2015**

This report by Mrs Sandy Ferrelly, will focus on the more recent events and issues facing DISH.

As forecast at our Annual General Meeting last year, national changes to the benefit system and services being provided are now having a significant effect on disabled people. Many people who were previously adjudged as unfit to work are now been assessed as fit for work and having their benefits cut. Since Councils are also facing funding pressures this is also reducing the level of support that Social Services can offer. There are more and more requests to DISH for help, both in making the necessary physical and or mental adjustment necessary and in requests for DISH's support in benefit claims.

DISH continues to express its gratitude to Huntingdonshire District Council who have recognised how we can support people in many ways, particularly in benefit claims, and have continued to fund us so generously. However, our HDC grant expires in the next financial year and we do not yet know how HDC will continue to support us in future. We are also very grateful for the continued support received from local town councils, Huntingdon, St Ives and St Neots and, of course, from the Huntingdon Freeman's Trust. We would also like to thank the Varrier Jones Foundation for continuing to provide DISH with accommodation at a very economical rate.

In addition to these funding supporters we are also grateful to other charities who have helped us, such as the Barbara Ward Foundation and Lloyd's TSB for children's services. These other charitable grants expired at the end of this financial year.

It is worth noting that DISH has supported many people with disabilities in Huntingdonshire and its environs, obtaining an annual equivalent of over £226,000.00 in welfare benefits, from central government funding. In addition. This allows more money to be spent in the local economy. It must be noted that this is an under-estimate since not all people that we help advise us of the eventual outcome.

Our organisation could not function without the help of volunteers and on behalf of the Trustees I would like to thank all our voluntary workers for their dedicated efforts during the year. The workload is still increasing and we hope that more volunteers will step forward.

I would like to add my personal thanks on behalf of the Trustees to Audrey Gatford, who joined us as Manager just one year ago, on Ollie Cooper's retirement. She has faced the changing world with great determination to continue DISH's good work for the disabled people of Huntingdonshire. In this she has been ably assisted by Michael O'Fee and Jackie Newman, to whom go our thanks also.

Our sister organisation, Disability Cambridgeshire, has decided to move out of the offices which we have shared at Papworth Everard. This has necessitated a change to DISH's telephone number.

**Please help us by letting everybody you know that DISH's new telephone numbers are:
03303553256 (cheaper for mobiles) or 01480 748 168**

Next year will be full of challenges and we will continue to struggle to survive financially. As members the Trustees would very much welcome your help, particularly in the following areas:

- Promoting DISH's work wherever you have influence
- Letting us know anyone or any way that can provide additional funding
- Promoting ways in which local entrepreneurs and businesses can offer work placements or the like to disabled people

Sandy Ferrelly,

November 2015

Audrey Gatford: Manager's Report

I have been with Disability Huntingdonshire for just over a year now. It has been a sometimes challenging but always very fulfilling time. My role is varied, and I have particularly enjoyed undertaking some of casework. It is very gratifying to help people to obtain awards which can transform their lives.

Although the organisation is very small, it is very effective, and this reflects the dedication of the staff, volunteers and trustees. I would like to thank them for the support that they have given me. I particularly thank Michael O'Fee and Jackie Newman for their hard work, and volunteers Hilary Bayles and Caroline O'Brian. Behind the scenes is our web page developer, Mike Searle.

We have also been pleased this year to host a work placement from the Papworth Rehabilitation Centre, and to have had a month's volunteer support from two Polish students who were visiting the UK.

We have a website and a facebook page, but our reputation ensures that clients return to us, and many new clients are enlisted through word of mouth recommendations.

People with disabilities are often housebound. Many cannot use or do not have access to Internet. Last year, DISH made the equivalent of 332 (30 minute unit) Home Visits. Telephone Information and face to face interviews resulted in over 2000 client contacts over the year. We offer a valued and well used service.

During the year we also set up a successful partnership with St Neots Children's Centre. This was led by caseworker Nicola Gilroy. Over the last financial year, a total of 84 families with disabled children were assisted. Nicola has now moved on to new challenges and we thank her for her efforts. We are, however, continuing to work on children's applications. The majority of families were helped to claim Disability Living Allowance. This was used for a variety of beneficial expenses, not normally afforded, such as:

- outings;
- specialist tutors not available through statutory services;
- special toys and equipment;
- replacement clothing;
- dietary needs;
- personal assistants and childminders

At the request of parents and local Children's Centre managers, our family adviser co-ordinated meetings of parent groups. Parents exchanged experiences, overcame isolation, and gained mutual support. The adviser was later able to follow up individual cases. We have had increasing numbers of parents approaching us via this connection, mainly for DLA applications. This has facilitated early interventions for children with disabilities. Parents have been able to consider returning to work. Families have reduced stress and anxiety.

The landscape of Welfare Benefits has changed dramatically due to the current and previous Government's Welfare Reforms. People with disabilities belong to a group that is the most affected. Vulnerable people, particularly those with disabilities, and those in pockets of deprivation (eg Huntingdon North, St Neots), will need to be guided through these in order to maximise their income and to dispel the likelihood of becoming reliant on charities and local authorities for crisis help and discretionary funding.

An application for Disability Living Allowance (child) or Personal Independence Payment (adult) can take anything up to 4 hours to complete. DISH is one of the few services that will undertake to do

this on a face to face basis. Help from people with welfare benefits expertise reduces the likelihood of inaccurate information being submitted and the wrong decisions being made, leading to protracted and expensive Appeals. We have, however, experience in making successful Appeals to Tribunal. Our services are in great demand.

DISH, by taking our clients through the bewildering benefits minefield helps clients to maximise income and to regain dignity through financial independence. People with disabilities can make healthier choices, reduction in anxiety improves mental health, and reduces calls on health and social services.

We have established for next financial year a formal Partnership and SLA with Huntingdon and District MS Society. We work in partnership and take referrals from: Hunts Blind and the Huntingdon Physical Disabilities Team. We collaborate with, and signpost to: Cambridgeshire Alliance for Independent Living; Royal British Legion; Axiom and Hunts Money Advice; St Neot's Time bank and Foodbank and many other local and national services for people with disabilities. We liaise where possible with the Department of Work and Pensions.

We are making applications to charities for grants to fund an Outreach project. This would enable us to reach more vulnerable people in local Community Centres, Children's Centres or Doctor's Surgery. We have had expressions of interest from various centres. We want to be there. Professionals and potential clients want us there too. We just need the money to do it.

Senior Welfare Officer, Michael O'Fee

Every year I seem to write about change. If anything, this year has seen an acceleration in those changes. We have yet to see Universal Credit introduced in this region, but the rollout of Personal Independence Payment is proceeding at full pace. The final stage of the Employment and Support Allowance introduction has now been completed. Many people who thought their income was stable have had to fill in complex forms – in some cases, for the first time in decades. Even with our assistance, the process has been very distressing for a lot of people. And it is government policy that it will be repeated every couple of years.

On a more positive note, a major feature of the past 12 months has been the level of co-operation between Disability Huntingdonshire and other organisations. We've always worked with other groups on a formal and informal basis in the past but now it's more significant than ever. Nobody knows everything, and the goal is to provide the most comprehensive support we can to our clients. I'm fortunate in that I get to see the end results of these collaborations without having to concern myself with any of the administrative details.

There are so many of these partnerships that I dare not try to list them as I'm bound to miss someone out. They could be charities that provide support for people with specific medical conditions, come from housing associations or be more concerned specifically with the provision of care. Benefits are my specialism, so I'm able to add those skills to the mix. In return, care plans and other reports provided by those organisations, plus their detailed knowledge of the individual client greatly assist my work. These collaborations have definitely improved my success rate in making applications for benefits and enabled me to see more people than I could manage on my own. With all of us trying to do more for less, these relationships are invaluable if we are to continue to provide the help people deserve.

Over my years at Disability Huntingdonshire, I've learned not to take anything for granted or plan too far in advance. I'm loathe to make any predictions, but if pushed I will say collaborations will maintain or increase their significance. More people will come to us through other professionals, and yet there will always be those who just walk in the door looking for help. However they come to us, it will be up to us to do everything we can for them.

Jackie Newman Information Officer

As first point of contact for Disability Huntingdonshire, I talk to clients before cases are passed on to our specialist advisers. I have found that this year, again, the majority of phone calls coming in are about welfare benefits. Two subjects come up frequently: first, how do you get started when intending to make a benefits claim, (the process is often frustrating and confusing for people), and second, which criteria do people need to satisfy in order to be eligible for specific benefits, for example, Personal Independence Payment or Attendance Allowance.

Clients often phone up needing explanation and clarification following complex dealings with the DWP and the tax credits office. Staff at Disability Huntingdonshire are able to offer a face - to - face service, taking time to talk through all the details involved in making a claim. With our many years of experience, we can approach cases with a knowledge which gives clients the best possible chance of getting a fair assessment from the DWP. Many times this year, we have supported clients to gain successful outcomes for their claims where they have often struggled on their own to tackle the lengthy and complicated benefits forms.

In the last couple of AGM reports, I have mentioned the steady increase we have noticed in the number of phone calls we get to the information line each year. This year has certainly felt like a time when the phone lines have been busier than ever, and in fact this seems to be reflected in our statistics. It's not really surprising that there has been a marked increase in phone calls when considering the huge changes to the benefits system that have taken place in recent times. We anticipate that the need for clients to get detailed information will become even greater when the new benefit, Universal Credit, is rolled out in this region very soon.

Although most of our work is to do with welfare benefits, we do of course also get calls about other issues, and we try to provide information which is constructive in helping people to deal with the challenges they face.

Recently, for example, I had a long conversation with a client who was finding it increasingly difficult to move around safely inside her home. She had had an injury at work, resulting in spine and nerve damage, which meant that she was unable to continue with the job she had been doing. She wanted to speak with someone who could help her identify the different types of support she might require in the future. She'd already spoken to a specialist legal adviser at another organisation about the implications of having had an accident at work, so that particular issue was already being tackled; however, her difficulty with getting around safely inside her home was a separate issue which needed addressing. After listening carefully to what she had to say, I was able to signpost her to an occupational therapist who I knew would be able to offer specific advice and information about the kinds of equipment and adaptations she might need to assist her with indoors mobility. She also told me that she had applied for Personal Independence Payment but had, so far, not received the result of her claim from the DWP. I was able to tell her that, should the claim prove unsuccessful, we would be able to help her make an appeal against the decision, including representing her at tribunal if necessary, and that she should get in touch with us again if needed.

This is an example of the way in which a single enquiry from a client can throw up many aspects of an issue they are facing, and how detailed discussion can start to identify solutions.

Treasurer's Report for Year Ending 31st March 2015

INCOME - £ 55,211 - NO CHANGE
COSTS- £ 51,280 - DOWN BY 11%

These Annual Accounts cover the period when our manager retired, and so our salary costs were significantly lower while we recruited. These savings were partially offset because our premises and office costs rose since Disability Cambridgeshire are still not in a position to pay for their office space. We are grateful to Cambridgeshire Alliance for helping out with these costs.

However our new manager is leading the process to replace the expensive equipment contracts we inherited with more efficient and cost effective alternatives, and I expect to see the impact of this next year.

Our income remained stable due to the multi-year agreements I reported last year, so we were able to make a welcome small contribution to our reserves. There will be significant reductions this year, and we are trying very hard to source new funding to maintain our services.

I am very grateful to all the funders who are listed in this report, most of whom have financed our work for the disabled community for many years, and I would also like to thank our volunteers without who we would not be able to deliver such a cost effective service.

DL Morgan, Treasurer

Please note that copies of the Annual Accounts for April 2014 to March 2015 are available for inspection on request, and are also to be found on the Charity Commission web site.

Our Funders

We are grateful to the Local Councils and Trusts who have funded our charitable work over the last year. They are listed below :

Huntingdonshire District Council
Cambridgeshire County Council
Huntingdon Freeman's Trust
St Neots Town Council
St Ives Town Council
Huntingdon Town Council
Lloyd's TSB
Barbara Ward Foundation