

THE TRUSTEE ROLE AT AUTISM EARLY SUPPORT

June 2023



Firstly, thank you for your interest in becoming a Trustee for Autism Early Support Trust Ltd. ("AES") in doing so you would become part of our exciting and dynamic organisation.

At AES (formerly Puzzle Centre), we are extremely proud of the quality of the services we provide and our commitment and proven track record of supporting families and children with autism and other communication difficulties.

But, we live in challenging times, and critical to the future success and sustainability of AES is strong governance. We have ambitious plans for expansion and for the development of our pioneering services, and as an organisation we believe that our Trustees are central to our success.

Our Trustees have the responsibility for developing and guiding our strategic direction, as well as for ensuring that the activities and policies adopted by AES support the achievement of our charitable objects and purposes. The role can be challenging, but at the same time, it is also extremely rewarding.

We outline here the full extent of the Trustee role and the work of Autism Early Support and you can see our work in action [here](#).

Best wishes



Graham Wylie

Chair, AES Board of Trustees

Who we are

Autism Early Support Trust Ltd. ("AES") offers early support and specialist education to autistic children, children with sensory, communication and interaction differences and their families.

We believe every child should have the chance to find their place in the world, be able to communicate their needs and learn alongside their peers with acceptance and support.

Our aim is to work alongside parents and practitioners to give every child the foundations they need for the next stage of their education. If we can enable a child to feel safe and understood, they become happier and they can flourish.

AES was established in 2001 and was formerly known as the Puzzle Centre.

What we do

Our early support and specialist education encompasses specific, structured and targeted neuroaffirmative approaches founded on established research, evidence-based practice and our extensive experience.

Through our services, we aim to equip all children with the tools and confidence they need to communicate, explore, play and enjoy the world around them. In response to the child's needs, wants and preferences, we make environmental adaptations and create the supports a child needs to feel ready to learn.

Help is accessed through the Circle Centre, our specialist nursery near Buckingham and our Outreach Service which supports families in the community and online through projects including The Parent's Portal, Parent Support Groups, and Assessments and Support Packages.

Our Approach

Through our services we encourage autistic children and children with sensory, communication and interactions differences to be their authentic selves without needing to mask or change themselves to feel accepted in a non-autistic majority society. Our specialist multi-disciplinary team of teachers, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, nursery co-ordinators and learning assistants identify and put the supports in place to make a child feel safe and regulated so they can enjoy learning. Alongside this, we work with parents and carers to help them to feel confident in supporting their child and in advocating for their individual needs.

Our supports are always:

Child-led: We look at everything through the child's lens first, their well-being and happiness is always our priority. We focus on understanding and appreciating the child's perspective, we do not work towards trying to change them. We accommodate each child's needs to maximise function and use their skills and strengths to enable the child to thrive, learn and develop.

Needs-led: Regardless of diagnosis, we listen to the parent, we observe the child and we work with them to support the areas of need.

Focussed on a child's strengths: We design our support around the child's strength, interests and preferences to optimise engagement and enable the child to thrive.

Neuroaffirmative: We listen to and believe there is always more to learn from the neurodivergent population. We strive to adapt and tailor our support to reflect these perspectives.

Our Strategy & Purpose

To fulfil the purpose and aims of our organisation, we follow a strategic plan as a framework for our roadmap. Our current strategic plan (2021-23) focuses on three key objectives:

- Deliver exemplary children's services
- Develop and grow our outreach services
- Build a sustainable income and resource base.

And within our objectives we have five aims:

- Children's services are an exemplar of best practice
- Maintain 'Outstanding' (Ofsted) in our flagship nursery
- Support more families and practitioners through outreach
- Develop and empower an active parent support network
- Cultivate, retain and develop our key stakeholders
- Drive growth through voluntary and trading income.

This year we have been developing our longer term 5 year plan which maps out our drive to:

- Improve outcomes for more autistic children and their families
- Become recognised as UK leaders in autism education
- Achieve financial stability & independence
- Develop strategic partnerships to raise our profile and influence change



Today's Challenges

A key part of the trustee's role is to help the charity navigate the changing landscape by staying abreast of change and supporting the senior team to stay deliver on remain agile and able to deliver on our strategic aims.

Today the UK charity sector is impacted by a unique and challenging set of circumstances. Demand for services is increasing while high levels of inflation are affecting income. Donations year-on-year, are worth less in real terms and sector wide, there is a reported 40% drop in donations as the cost of living crisis is directly impacting levels of disposable income.

Like many small charities, we are finding the current economic climate challenging. By response, we are doing everything possible to remain agile and minimise risk by accessing funds from a range of sources and enhancing our offering through new services like [The Parent's Portal](#). Plus, we have recently restructured our fundraising team so we now feel we have the right people in the right jobs.

Another sector-wide issue affecting us today is staff recruitment and retention. A recent CAF Research Report found 60% of charities are struggling to recruit or retain suitably qualified candidates and volunteers, and 70% of charities say the rising cost of living is affecting their workforce. Moreover, we are reliant on professions of which there is a national shortage - occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and early years practitioners are incredibly hard to find and recruit. It is key therefore that we continually invest in our talent through well-being initiatives, training and professional development.

Whilst we navigate these challenges, we remain acutely aware that the families we work with are facing these too and that this environment puts them under even greater pressure.

So despite today's backdrop, our staff and trustees remain focussed on our cause and on making a lasting difference to the children and families we work with.



Why become a Trustee?

Becoming a Trustee can boost your career

Trustees are exposed to a wide range of skills needed to oversee a charity: strategy and business planning, governance, HR, finance, marketing, fundraising, evaluation, property law and more. It can be an effective way to build your skills and your CV.

You can give back to your community

As a Trustee, you can donate your skills, time and attention to a cause you love.

Trustees are often drawn to a charity because they're passionate about a particular cause, whether that's something they're interested in or something they've experienced themselves.

You can share your skills, knowledge and experience

Everyone has something unique and valuable to offer a charity. Serving as a Trustee can be extremely personally rewarding.

Our Board of Trustees

Our Board is responsible for agreeing the strategic direction of the charity, setting the budgetary framework and deciding upon major undertakings. Responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the charity is delegated to Sarah Sweet-Rowley, our Chief Executive Officer, who reports to the Trustees on a regular basis. This ensures that our Trustees have all the information they need to monitor progress and agree any strategic or budgetary adjustments which may become necessary.

As a Board we must always:

- act in the best interests of Autism Early Support Trust Ltd. ("AES"), exercising the same standard of duty of care that a prudent person would apply if looking after the affairs of someone for whom they have responsibility
- act collectively as a group and not as individuals
- ensure that all of our decisions and actions are consistent with AES's values and how the charity is seen by the people and organisations who are involved in our work and by the wider public
- have regard to the proper use of our power and act in line with our Charity Articles and our own aims and values
- ensure that AES follows the law

We also consider rules, codes and standards, and follow regulatory guidance, the Charity Ethical Principles and other good practice initiatives that promote confidence in charities and create a supportive environment. You are not expected to have a detailed knowledge of the legislation that governs our work, as our staff will support you. However, you should be aware that legislation exists and where necessary you should be satisfied that the charity has Policies and Procedures and reporting mechanisms in place in order to ensure compliance.

As a Trustee you will need:

- a commitment to the vision, mission and values of AES
- to be willing to meet the minimum time requirement
- integrity
- good strategic vision and independent judgement
- creative thinking skills

- team working skills
- an understanding of the experiences, needs and challenges faced by the people we support (or at least a willingness to learn more)
- to comply to our Code of Conduct and AES policies

What's involved in being a Trustee

Time commitment

Our Board meets six times a year, Thursdays at 6:30pm. Most meetings last approximately two hours and are held virtually or at the charity's office in Buckingham. We aim to distribute papers electronically one week in advance of meetings.

Trustees also attend a strategic "Away Day" which takes place on a weekday once a year.

In addition, Trustees are each assigned oversight of an area that presents key strategic risk or opportunity and this usually relates to their specific interest and expertise. This allows us to audit procedures, stay focussed on priority areas and offer a further layer of counsel to the senior team.

Trustees are also asked to visit the Circle Centre nursery, to understand at first hand the issues faced by the organisation, its staff and service users. One formal Trustee "monitoring" visit takes place once every term on a rolling basis by a Trustee.

It will vary from time to time but on average the role could take 2-3 hours per week. Many of our existing Trustees work full time and can provide advice and guidance about balancing your time commitments.

Term of office

Trustees are appointed for a minimum of 3 years and can continue for a further two periods of 3 years (maximum term 9 years).

The role is voluntary

Trustees are volunteers and their role is unpaid. This does not form any type of employment contract and should not be interpreted as such.

The formal role

Trustees have, and must accept, ultimate responsibility for directing the affairs of AES, ensuring that it is well-run and delivering the charitable outcomes for the benefit of the public for which it was formed. The Board ensures that all of its decisions and actions are consistent with the charity's values.

Trustees have a responsibility to ensure that AES complies with:

- charity law, and the requirements of the Charity Commission as regulator
- the requirements or rules, and the charitable purpose and objects, set out in AES's own governing document (our Charity Articles).
- the requirements of other legislation and other regulators which govern the activities of the charity including OFSTED (The Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills)
- the requirement for Trustees to act with integrity, and avoid any personal conflicts of interest or misuse of charity funds or assets

Duty of prudence:

- ensure that AES is and will remain solvent
- use charitable funds and assets wisely, and only to further the purposes and interests of AES
- avoid undertaking activities that might place AES's property, funds, assets or reputation at undue risk
- take special care when investing the funds of AES, or borrowing funds for AES to use
- Duty of care:
 - exercise reasonable care and skill as Trustees, using personal knowledge and experience to ensure that the charity is well run and efficient
- consider getting external professional advice on all matters where there may be material risk to AES, or where the Trustees may be in breach of their duties
- protect and safeguard people

As part of fulfilling Trustee duties, you must take steps to protect from harm the people who come into contact with AES. This includes:

- people who benefit from our work
- staff
- volunteers

Trustees must also ensure that AES:

- pursues its Objects and Purposes, as set out in its governing document (our Articles)
- uses its assets exclusively to pursue those aims
- always acts in the interest of its beneficiaries

Trustees should also:

- make decisions for the good of AES
- uphold and promote the principles of equity, diversity, inclusion and anti-racism, and ensure that these are embedded in the organisation and that they help to deliver the charity's public benefit
- avoid conflict with personal interests (in accordance with our Conflict of Interest policy)
- ensure there are no profits resulting from the role
- contribute to the Board and the governance of the charity as a whole and also provide strategic advice

The process of becoming a Trustee with AES

It will start with the submission of an application form or a series of interviews and visiting our Circle Centre nursery. Following these initial stages, all trustees then undergo:

A Trustee disqualification check

Individuals are already automatically disqualified as charity Trustees if they:

- have unspent convictions for offences of dishonesty or deception
- are currently declared bankrupt or subject to bankruptcy restrictions or an interim order
- are subject to a debt relief order, a debt relief restrictions order or interim order
- have been disqualified from being a company director
- have previously been removed as a Trustee, or as a charity officer, agent or employee, by the Commission or the High Court due to misconduct or mismanagement

An Ofsted EY2 submission and Enhanced DBS check

The check will show the full details of a person's criminal record such as cautions, reprimands, warnings, spent and unspent convictions.

Any information given will be treated in the strictest confidence. Suitable applicants will not be refused a role because of spent offences which are not relevant to, and do not place them at or make them a risk in, this role. All cases will be examined on an individual basis.

The request for two recent references

On successful completion of these requirements an induction process would begin which in the first instance would involve meeting the full staff and trustee team.

