



**ASCape Strategic Plan
2026 - 2030**

INTRODUCTION

ASCape is the only charity of its kind in Dorset dedicated to improving the lives of Autistic and socially anxious young people aged up to 25 and their families. We are run-by a small dynamic group of staff and volunteers with lived experience of autism, and deeply rooted in the local community.

Founded as a small support group in 2018, ASCape offers a wide programme of youth clubs, social groups and family activities for all age ranges, from under 5s through to young adults aged 18-25. We provide a safe environment for children, young people, and their parent/carers, to meet up and socialise, share experiences, and gain peer support.

To date, ASCape has supported over 300 children and their families through a range of family-based activities; and over 1,000 parents and carers with information and resources, online peer support, and group wellbeing sessions.

This strategic plan was co-developed by the Trustees in consultation with the community of children, young people, parents and carers who participate in our activities, through workshops, surveys, our Youth Engagement Forum and child-friendly approaches.

OUR VISION, MISSION AND VALUES

Our vision is a world where every Autistic child and young person, regardless of background, is accepted and able to participate fully in society.

Our mission is to provide a programme of social activities, peer support and information for Autistic and socially anxious children and young people up to 25 years and their families in West Dorset, and to raise awareness of autism and social anxiety in the wider community.

ASCAPE stands for:

A – Action *We are committed to not just talk, but to deliver activities*

S – Support *We exist to support Autistic and socially anxious children and their families by providing a safe non-judgemental space*

C – Community *We believe in the power of communities to make a difference, and to make decisions that affect their lives*

A – Acceptance *We believe in diversity and not passing judgement on behaviour or parenting styles*

P – Presence *We exist to be present in the lives of families affected by social anxiety and autism and to amplify their priorities*

E – Equality *We believe in equality, equity, inclusion and social justice*

WHO WE SERVE

Children and young people

Our primary beneficiaries are Autistic children and young people, including those on the diagnostic pathway and those that experience social anxiety, in West Dorset. According to the ADHD and Autism Needs Assessment (2022), 941 children in Dorset have a diagnosis of autism, a figure higher than the national average. Waiting lists for diagnosis can be anything from three to six or seven years and followed by a battle for suitable education. ASCape does not require a formal autism diagnosis to attend any of our groups or activities.

Autistic young people demonstrate a wide variety of traits, quirks and challenges, with each individual presenting with a unique profile. The young people that we support have a wide range of social challenges that can make it difficult for them to access and navigate school-based and out-of-school activities due to differences in communication styles, sensory processing, and societal attitudes. ASCape supports children and young people as they grow, with many joining the youth club after attending family activities when they are younger.

Autistic young people, especially those in rural communities, are often isolated and at risk of mental health problems including burn-out and depression. This isolation is exacerbated in rural areas because of the paucity of public services, limited educational options and absence of public transport. As well as social anxiety, our young people sometimes struggle to self-regulate and manage their emotions. They may have low self-esteem and feel pessimistic about their future. We see panic attacks, high levels of anxiety, school refusal, self-harm, suicidal ideation and attempts at suicide.

Above the age of 16, many of our teens are struggling with new education or training environments where their additional needs may not be as well understood, or in the same way, as when they were at school. They enter new and demanding social situations and begin to look for work. High numbers of Autistic young adults are represented in statistics for those that are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), and they are more likely to experience abuse, negative relationships and to use drugs. Adult mental health care in West Dorset is currently very compromised and there is little mentor support available for those finding it difficult to transition to the workplace. Our 18+ youth club is designed by and for Autistic and socially anxious young adults, specifically to support those who have recently left school or college and are starting out in the world of work.

ASCape makes a difference to Autistic children and young people by:

- providing a safe space and opportunities for them to express their needs, and giving them a sense of belonging and trust where they can develop positive social and emotional skills
- providing a range of accessible social activities led by their own needs and interests, helping to improve their physical and mental wellbeing

- offering therapeutic and supportive outdoor and active experiences known to build confidence and improve mental health, with opportunities to make friends and build social connections
- enabling them to have more successful life outcomes

Families

Our secondary beneficiaries are the families of these young people, including their parents, siblings, other carers and extended family. The process of diagnosis can take several years, which in itself can be a huge challenge. Following diagnosis there is very limited support available in the West Dorset area. Parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), especially those in rural communities, are often isolated and at risk of burnout. We support parents and caregivers of Autistic and socially anxious young people, including by signposting them to available local-authority-provided services and support, and sharing information about young people's rights.

Very few service providers offer a whole-family approach. ASCape addresses this by seeking to provide opportunities for the whole family to spend time together, socialise with other families and gain peer support.

WHAT WE OFFER

Children, young people and their families

- Family Activity afternoons (4-14)
- Teens Youth Club (11-17)
- 18+ group Youth Club and social activities (18-25)
- Creative / skills workshops (e.g. music, gardening, woodwork, cookery, art, etc) (all ages)

Parents and carers

- Parent/carer support wellbeing sessions and social evenings
- Online support group (Facebook and WhatsApp)
- Monthly webinars on key topics
- Website with up-to-date information and resources for parents on navigating education, health and social care

In addition to these regular activities, we host, participate in and facilitate outreach and community engagement events, meet with schools, and provide links to local campaigning and neurodiversity groups.

OUR STRATEGIC GOALS

Goal 1 Advance the wellbeing of Autistic young people aged 0-25 in (West) Dorset through peer support such as youth groups, and supported social activities such as family activities.

Our primary focus is to provide a programme of social activities and events that are welcoming and appealing to Autistic and socially anxious children and young people, including those who are undiagnosed or on the diagnostic pathway.

ASCape is dedicated to ensuring the safety and well-being of children in accordance with the statutory guidance on inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children: Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018. Our activities are covered by our safeguarding policy that is fully compliant with the Pan Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership (PDSCP).

Over the next five years we will:

- 1 Maintain and expand our existing groups to provide regular, accessible and safe social activities for Autistic and socially anxious children and young people during school term times and with extra holiday provision.
- 2 Continue to consult with the children and young people we support and their support network to ensure that activities reflect their needs and interests (through a variety of feedback mechanisms¹).
- 3 Increase the number of children and young people engaging regularly in each of our groups by intentionally seeking to explore and unlock barriers to their participation²

Goal 2 To support and empower carers and families, including siblings, of these young people by providing peer support via groups and family activities and encourage sharing of ideas, resources and support within and between these groups

By supporting parents, carers and families, Autistic children and young people can become less isolated and at risk of poor physical and mental health. This can take the form of peer support, provision of information, advice and signposting as well as whole-family activities.

Over the next five years we will:

1. Increase the number of parents/carers receiving support through the provision of regular well-being sessions, webinars, online peer support groups and online signposting and resources

¹ These include - but are not limited to - inviting post-activity feedback, questionnaires, the youth engagement forum.

² Predominantly through our Community and Youth Engagement Officer, Youth Engagement Forum and youth mentors.

2. Continue to provide a diverse range of social activities for the whole family to participate in, including siblings following consultation with families
3. Continue to consult and engage with carers and families including siblings to ensure our activities reflect their needs and interests (through a variety of feedback mechanisms³)

Goal 3 To ensure the sustainability of ASCape by securing long-term funding for our programme of activities and diversifying our funding sources, and by building the capacity of the organisation

We have been successful in gaining multi-year funding from National Lottery and Children in Need, as well as a proliferation of small short-term grants and donations from local funding channels and interest groups such as the Dorset Council Youth Fund and Dorset Community Foundation.

Over the next five years we will:

- 1 Continue to develop our relationships with donors who provide long-term, core and strategic funding, including the National Lottery and Children in Need.
- 2 Develop and evolve a fundraising strategy that sets out how we will broaden the range of funding sources and set the future direction of how we are resourced.
- 3 Increase capacity, the number of paid staff roles, and the overall FTE of ASCape's team, as well as ensuring that staff and volunteers are supported with the necessary training and resources to carry out their responsibilities safely.

Goal 4 Raise awareness about autism and social anxiety, challenge fear and prejudice and promote equality, equity, and diversity.

In addition to delivering a programme of activities, we will explore the development of 'Action ASCape' to continue to engage with local schools and our community to raise awareness locally about autism, and engage with local authorities to increase their accountability towards Autistic and socially anxious children and young people.

In the next five years we will:

- 1 Undertake and build on an analysis of local existing research and consultations to identify key local advocacy priorities.

³ As above, including annual survey and Facebook snapshots

- 2 Develop an advocacy strategy in collaboration with local Autistic young people and their families and monitor implementation.
- 3 Further strengthen our partnerships with local youth, SEND, and autism organisations, charities, networks and campaigns.

Goal 5 Ensure the meaningful engagement of young members of the ASCape community in shaping our work

ASCape's provision is shaped around our young people's expressed needs and interests. We consult them regularly through a range of feedback channels relevant to their age, including reflection time in youth club, post-activity feedback, and individual one-to-ones. We have already begun to formalise a commitment to young people's participation and leadership in ASCape's decision-making, and we will continue to grow this over the course of this strategic plan.

In the next five years we will:

- 1 Continue to support and mentor a Young Trustee to represent Autistic young people on the Board of Trustees and advise on how we can increase their visibility and amplify their voice.
- 2 Strengthen our Youth Engagement Forum as a platform for young people to voice their vision and priorities, supported by the Youth Club's Lead and the Young Trustee.

OUR STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The new strategy comes at an exciting time for ASCape. Our success and growth over the period of our last strategic plan (2023 - 2025) has seen ASCape emerge as a beacon of support for Autistic and socially anxious children and young people, their parents and caregivers, and their extended families and social networks. It has also begun to raise awareness of Autism and related issues in the local community with many local organisations seeking to support and/or partner with us to increase the reach and impact of their activities. ASCape is under pressure to extend its activities to meet the needs of Autistic children and young people, and their families, over a larger geographic area, as well as increasing the range of activities we offer locally in Bridport and the surrounding area.

At the same time, we wish to build stronger community leadership, voice and engagement into the structure and governance of ASCape through our Youth Engagement Forum, and hold ourselves accountable to young people's decision making, including via mentorship, as represented in our new Strategic Goal 5.

Therefore, for the next five years, ASCape will pursue a strategy grounded in deepening, enriching and extending the current model with a focus on local impact, strengthening advocacy, and building a sustainable infrastructure for future expansion. We have structured our strategy into two phases to ensure that the quality of services we offer remains high and that our commitment to safeguarding the children and young people we serve remains paramount, as well as to insure against staff and volunteer burnout.

Phase 1 (2026–2028): Deepen and Lead Locally

During the first phase, ASCape will focus on deepening our offer of high-quality, family-centric services while amplifying the voices of Autistic young people and their families in Bridport and West Dorset.

We will do this by means of the following strategies:

- Enhance programme quality with a stronger focus on mental health and tailored family support.
- Increase core staffing (subject to review of needed roles and responsibilities) and develop organisational capacity in data/CRM, finance, communications and advocacy.
- Strengthen governance, including through mentored youth representation on the Board of Trustees
- Strengthen our monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) framework to capture impact as well as reach and coverage
- Reduce dependency on short-term grants by developing sustainable funding streams (e.g. by exploring training/consultancy for local employers, businesses and charities, through membership fees, and social contracts).
- Invest in digital growth to support parents and carers - webinars, online forums, and a website hub for parents and carers.
- Conduct a feasibility study and reach out to potential partners in one new location to evaluate capacity, community appetite, and funding potential before broader rollout.
- Considering how we can pilot ASCape’s support model with parent/carer meetups and teen groups in areas like Dorchester or Weymouth.

Phase 2 (2028–2030): Prepare for Thoughtful Expansion

The strategy aims to respect ASCape’s deep community roots in Bridport, while recognising the broader regional need for support among families with Autistic children across the Dorset Council area. By focusing on measurable outcomes and operating within financially realistic boundaries, we hope to continue to attract long-term funding from organisations such as the National Lottery and Children in Need. The phased approach avoids the pitfalls of rapid overexpansion, ensuring that service quality and local trust remain uncompromised. Ultimately, ASCape aims to establish itself not merely as a local charity providing activities and peer support, but as a **beacon organisation**—one that influences the wider system through its integrity, insight, and impact.

We will do this by means of the following strategies:

- Explore building on ASCape's awareness raising to develop an advocacy and campaigning arm of ASCape 'Action ASCape' to highlight and address the root causes of social exclusion and isolation, push for better service provision, health and education and promote equality and diversity.
- Conduct a feasibility study into developing ASCape into an autism training provider in West Dorset for parents and carers, e.g., via NAS accreditation to deliver Early Bird+ and Teen Life parent courses.
- Link MEAL, research and learning to advocacy.
- Document and share ASCape's development as a best practice model, supplemented with a step-by-step toolkit for replication and adaptation.
- Inspire and support other community groups to become more autism friendly, using elements of ASCape's approach and model.

ASCAPE'S STRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE

ASCape is led by a small staff team supported by a Board of Trustees, specific freelance activity leaders and a team of 30 dedicated volunteers. Under our previous strategy, paid staff time amounted to 1.8 full time roles. To build the capacity and sustainability of the charity, and to meet the goals of the current strategy, we aim to expand this to 2.7 - 2.9 FTE. In the first instance, this will include an increase in FTE for the co-Directors, the administrator and the outreach officer, as well as the recruitment of a part time finance/grants officer, a communications officer and potentially an advocacy officer. There will be scope for further expansion of the staff team to meet the growing needs of the organisation and the community we serve as we evolve.

The Board is composed of nine trustees including a Chair and Treasurer. We aim to ensure that trustees collectively have experience of working in youth and children's services; charity management, financial management and fundraising, education (including SEND) and healthcare.

To ensure the charity is grounded in the lived reality of Autistic young people, we aim for 50-75% of board membership to have lived experience, either as identifying as Autistic, socially anxious, or through having a close family member who is Autistic. We are committed to having at least one Youth Trustee, identifying as Autistic or socially anxious. The majority of our staff have personal experience of Autism, including as parents of Autistic young people.

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