

2019 Peter Scott Award recipient – Helen Storey

Helen Storey is the fourth person to receive the Peter Scott Award for Outstanding Contribution to Charity (2019). She is married, a mum and grandma, and lives near Penrith.

This award recognises her tremendous commitment to making life better for people in Cumbria, building on a track record dating back to 1996 and to Rochdale. Her career has been about bringing people together to support those, on the margins of society, who have no one else to turn to.

Helen's first job in the charity sector (1994-2006) was with a disability charity followed by a post, again in Rochdale, to establish a local arm of a Birmingham charity working with offenders, the homeless and those recovering from substance misuse.

In 2009 the family moved to Cumbria and Helen had another opportunity to respond to the needs of the hard to reach. She began working for Cumbria Reducing Offending Partnership Trust (CROPT) – bringing together organisations who wanted to do something about the social exclusion experienced by offenders. Over a five-year-period, she developed the charity to a staff of seven with 25 volunteers.

Then in 2014 Helen's grandson was recognised as being on the autistic spectrum. Being autistic means someone sees, hears and feels in a different, often more intense way to other people. It can make the world a very overwhelming place. There are around 700,000 autistic people in the UK, and every person on the autism spectrum is different.

Helen's response was immediate and practical, as she explains:

“When my grandson received his diagnosis, I packed myself off to the University of Cumbria to study autism to better understand his world and to be an effective grandma. One part of the course looked at the transition to adulthood for people with autism. Perhaps because of my background, I began to ask the question, ‘are people with autism getting into trouble because of their autism’?

“This sparked a journey of discovery that was a real eye-opener. When I realised MPs in Whitehall were asking the same questions and not getting an answer I organised, with the University, an ‘Autism and Criminal Justice Conference’ (Nov 2015). It attracted a lot of interest and momentum for action and answers. It also became clear that there was no practical help at all for adults with autism in Cumbria so, a few months later (Jan 2016), I set up the Triple A Project (All About Autism)” says Helen.

The organisation's aim is to empower those with autism to realise their full potential and build understanding, acceptance and respect. On a practical level this means Triple A provides Cumbria wide support to people with autism and training to professionals. Helen is also clear that the charity can only do this well by involving autistic people in the design and delivery of the training and help. This ‘co-production’ keeps Helen on her toes. She says she is always learning and that, as a result of this approach, three wonderful things began – the Navigator and Positive Pals Programme and the Discovery Panel.

The Navigator Programme steers adults with autism away from potentially harmful and negative behaviour – either as victim or perpetrator – and a two-year research project shows this is working. Triple A has also been working with the police.

Positive Pals, provides a safe place for autistic adults to meet, make friends and socialise. Each group is shaped by the needs of the individuals who attend, supported by a co-facilitator, and there are meetings in Penrith, Workington, Kendal, Carlisle and Barrow.

The Discovery Panel is a workshop devised by autistics, for autistics, to increase an individual's understanding of their own autism. Helen sees great potential for this aspect of Triple A's work in the coming year.

Another important strand of the charity's work is training and awareness building amongst professionals in the county who meet autistic adults including NHS staff, the police, housing associations and colleges. A film and e-book, commissioned by NHS England, is proving to be a great asset as is a short 'Making Plans for Nigel' mini-clip. And a film used in Police training that is used nationally. Others are in the pipeline, an Autism's Guide to Penrith and an education film for schools.

Helen says she feels a huge sense of responsibility because there is still so little practical help available for people with autism. She says it requires ongoing resources, and those resources are not there. Triple A is overwhelmed with enquiries, including from families with autistic children, and has to raise all its funds itself.

But, Helen is heartened by the difference the organisation is making in its 12 month life as an independent charity, she says:

"We can be pleased that along the way we are doing what we can, for who we can, the best we can. To serve such a richly diverse community means continuing to listen and learn and to build on the numbers for whom we do get it right."

2019 promises to be another good year for Triple A. They celebrate an anniversary, Helen will introduce a new member of the team - a young Cockapoo dog - and she will finish her degree. Helen will also be busy investing the £2,500 grant that comes with the Peter Scott Award in enabling the Triple A Team develop the work of the Discovery Panel.