



north east
sensory services

achieving independence for blind & deaf people



ANNUAL REPORT

To end March 2021

The Board of Directors

Chairman

John C Legg

Appointed in Meeting

John Imrie
Laura A Sharp, Vice Chair
Paul J Duncan (resigned 12 May 2021)
Lynn Hawcroft
Frank K Wahedally
Colin Boag (resigned 7 May 2021)
Christina Cooper
Leonard Ironside
Stephen C McPherson (resigned 25 February 2021)
Ian R W Herd (resigned 25 February 2021)
Hannah Watt
Charlotte Little
Gordon McHardy
Carmen Irving (appointed 16 June 2020)
Martin Housden (appointed 13 May 2021)

Observer

Cllr Theresa Coull, Moray Council

November 2021

Chairman's Report by John Legg

Throughout the depths of Covid, NESS maintained vital services to over 6,000 people living with serious sensory loss across the northeast of Scotland.



During 2021, Covid restrictions began to slowly ease. In response, NESS began the important process of returning to more normal service delivery, restarting activities that had been forced to close and developing new provision. Significantly, we were successful in a retender process for a major statutory contract, the renewal of charitable funding for several established projects and winning a prestigious Northern Star Business Award.

As the leading provider of integrated sensory services in Scotland, NESS is committed to continuously improving services and ways of working. While there was delight at moving away from many Covid restrictions, those that ensured the safety of service users and staff were retained, alongside the best aspects of digital communication and remote working. The introduction of 'Zoom' meetings, befriending phone calls, group discussion calls and express deliveries have, for example, greatly benefited many service users who struggle with emotional support, isolation and exclusion. It is planned to keep as many of these popular services going as possible.

New ways of working have been developed to meet new demands. Major reviews were completed on cyber security, databases and the organisational structure. In addition, new staff were recruited to replace several long serving staff members due to retire at the end of the year.

As always, we are indebted for the tremendous support received from service users, the wider public, local businesses, trusts and foundations and our stakeholders in local government, health and central government.

Finally, a huge thank you to all those involved in the NESS 'family' including our inspirational volunteers, staff, managers, and Directors. Throughout 2021, they consistently exceeded expectations in achieving independence for blind and deaf people.

Chief Executive's Report by Graham Findlay

Review of Activities in meeting our Objectives

In the financial year 20/21, NESS continued to deliver our services to a high standard within what was probably the most challenging year in our history.

In early March 2020, we started to look at how NESS needed to adapt to the growing concerns of the Covid-19 pandemic. We asked some staff with underlying health conditions to work from home and of course this moved to include everyone following the Government advice for lock down on the 23rd March.

Since then, our staff team have worked tirelessly to provide the best possible support to our service users. Support included:

- Every service user receiving a letter in their preferred format letting them know how they could contact NESS,
- Phone systems being diverted to staff mobiles and rotas set up,
- Open cases being contacted throughout every department in every geographical area NESS covers and support continuing where possible,
- Our most vulnerable service users being regularly contacted,
- Volunteers continuing to be supported,
- Deliveries of hearing aid batteries introduced,
- Some food parcels and provisions being delivered,
- Online support introduced, e.g. BSL contact group in Dundee to allow duty social work services to continue for our Deaf service users,
- A private social media group for NESS service users exclusively carrying information in BSL from many sources, all with interactive communication capability during daytime hours,
- Staff private Facebook page introduced for support,
- Range of funding looked for, including trusts, new Government support, donations, etc.
- We furloughed some staff through the Government's Job Retention Scheme which we are grateful for and this helped cash flow. Indeed, this scheme helped us greatly, as fundraising events had to be cancelled and a vital source of income significantly reduced,
- We were able to equip staff with new technology to allow them to work from home and keep in touch with service users and each other,
- We have introduced new technology to our staff including Microsoft Teams and gave the relevant training to staff.



Throughout, we have tried to keep a sense of normality and continued with staff supervisions, team meetings, regular updates, etc.

Our Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with Aberdeen, Moray, Dundee and Angus Health and Social Care Partnerships continued to be delivered successfully.

Angus, Dundee and Moray offered NESS extensions to our existing contracts which is testament to the impact and quality of our work.

NESS continues to make some of our non-statutory services available to people living in Aberdeenshire where we don't currently have a statutory contract. Many of our Added Value Services are accessed by service users from Aberdeenshire. We continue to input into the Aberdeenshire See Hear group.

Quality Systems

Quality is the heart of everything we do. Despite lockdowns and ongoing significant restrictions, we have done all we can to provide the services we could to a high standard.

NESS is a holder of both the Investors In People (IIP) standard and the advanced Gold Standard. We chose to be assessed continually by IIP and we are now in year three of a three-year assessment programme.

The assessment period has been extended until April 2022 so that a fair assessment of our work can be carried out. NESS is also a holder of the IIP Health and Wellbeing standard which recognises how well we look after our staff.

Service User Statistics

The total number of service users on our database for the whole of Grampian and Tayside in the year to 31 March 2021 was **6,327**.

Awareness Raising

NESS's Sensory Awareness Training usually takes place over one day, with lots of close contact activity (discussion, sighted guiding, sensory lunch, lipreading) and a large amount of information about sight loss, hearing loss, Deafness and deafblindness is communicated. NESS also delivers tailored training, which is delivered at a time and place to suit the group organising the training. NESS also gives informal talks to community groups about what NESS does. When the pandemic struck, it became clear that NESS could not continue with face-to-face training or talks and all the training that had been arranged was cancelled. This has led to a very different, remote way of working to deliver training and information.

While tailored training, which is usually shorter than the whole-day training, and the talks to community groups, could continue to take place remotely, using either Microsoft Teams, or sometimes the platform used by the people organising the training, delivering the whole-day's training on Microsoft Teams would not be effective. Research was carried out to identify the best way of delivering the whole-day training remotely. The research identified the best option was to create online e-learning, which could include a video conference element to enable discussion. Creating online e-learning would require an authoring tool and a Learning Management System (LMS) to track who was completing the training.

An authoring tool was identified, and the content of the training was written, photographs and videos to support learning were collated, and videos created to ensure all the content normally communicated during face-to-face training was included in the e-learning. Moodle was identified as the best LMS and the training was finally built and tested ready to be launched by April 2021.

Developing online e-learning has required a significant investment from NESS, as well as having to learn to work in a very different way. However, it is anticipated that online e-learning will remain a useful way of delivering training after the pandemic has ended.

As well as developing the online e-learning, during the period April 2020-March 2021 the following was delivered:

- Information about sensory loss was provided remotely to five organisations who were working on making their services more accessible. A Tailored Deaf Awareness training session was delivered to one organisation, reaching eight people,
- Sensory Awareness Training lectures for social work students at RGU and medical students at Aberdeen University were recorded on the Universities' online learning platforms to distribute to students. There is no way of counting the number of people who watched the videos, however class sizes would suggest that the recordings should reach a total of around 300 students,
- Two talks to community groups were delivered on Microsoft Teams, reaching approximately 20 people,
- One organisation held their annual conference remotely on an online conference platform, and NESS had a virtual stall. There is no way of knowing how many people this reached.

We are continually grateful to the Aberdeen See Hear group for supporting many of our training initiatives.

Added Value Services

NESS provides a **BSL to English language interpreter** booking service, utilising freelance interpreters and our own in-house interpreter. We only use fully qualified and registered interpreters and this is a chargeable service. During early lockdown, our interpreter set up a BSL information service via Facebook to provide our Deaf BSL users with reliable information about the pandemic, in their own language via reputable BSL video sources. This is a private group with 40 members. Maintained with updated information, personal responses to user posts and messages were added daily over the year. Much of our usual interpreting work moved to online, although with most public services closed or reduced, the numbers of assignments reduced considerably.

We undertook **176 assignments** during this period. Our in-house interpreter fulfilled 125, including two which were undertaken with a co-worker; the remainder being carried out by contractors. Jobs were spread through each of the local authority areas we operate in. Types of assignments varied greatly from personal medical and dental appointments to private family events and public performances.

The Eye Outpatient clinics at ARI were interrupted by the Covid-19 lockdown, with many patients not being seen in person and clinics operating with fewer appointments and remote consultations via the NHS' Near Me initiative. Our **Hospital Information Officer** was fully, and then partly furloughed during this period. Nevertheless, he assisted with **138** Eye Clinic patients' cases from across NHS Grampian and Shetland between November and March. This included **86** patients who were entirely new cases. We continued to ensure that information was available to patients attending Audiology and other clinical departments.

Our **Connect, Include Support (CIS)** service is aimed at socially isolated people aged 65+ living in Aberdeen City and Moray who have a significant visual and/or hearing impairment, living in their own homes or in sheltered housing. Most are in their 70s, 80s or 90s and clinically vulnerable.

None of their usual social and peer support groups have met during this year. For some, this was their only social contact. While our part-time project staff have been furloughed, our two full-time Project Co-ordinators, based in Aberdeen and Elgin respectively, have been running a telephone service, calling people registered with us at least once a week.

The team helped support **109** of our most senior service users. Prioritising those we'd identified as the most vulnerable during lockdown, we established contacts with, and were making referrals to, the network of community hubs in all the local authority areas.

Our specialist **Employment service** has remained busy, albeit without face-to-face appointments, during this incredibly difficult period for job seekers. Some already vulnerable clients, laid off rather than furloughed, have required support in accessing benefits; others, while furloughed have needed urgent guidance. People have still needed help in negotiating with their employer, DWP and Access to Work. All have needed personal contact.

We have continued to provide our service users with tailored support. We have supported **41** people; **27** in Aberdeen and **14** in Dundee during this period. There have been positive outcomes for most. Five unemployed people have moved into work, 26 people have been supported to retain their work or look at alternative work options, seven people have moved onto education and training and three people have secured work placements or volunteering opportunities. No mean feat during a pandemic!

We have continued to provide technology services to our clients, although Covid restrictions have played a huge part in disrupting our ability to carry out much of the face-to-face Hi-Tech support. In the early part of lockdown, most of the training was provided over the phone and although this was often difficult, on most occasions it turned out to be very fruitful. Visually impaired service users were given training on using many accessibility features of smart devices to enable them to continue to lead a more independent lifestyle. During this period, our **“ICT for All”** service has enabled **95** people with sensory loss to become better aware of the devices and equipment that can help them participate like their sighted and hearing peers. Although the number seeking support is less than for a normal year, it still shows a healthy demand.

Our **Young People’s Sensory Service (YPSS)** is the only project in Scotland that provides integrated sensory support to young people aged 0-19. All our young people suffer from a significant sight and/or hearing loss which can cause them social isolation and disadvantage in access to education, training, sport and leisure and eventually, gaining employment.

During the year, we organised various activities within the constantly changing parameters of the Covid restrictions. Some children’s activities were less restricted than those of the general population, but the changing rules and the usual challenge of Northeast weather contributed to the massive challenge of getting any face-to-face contact off the ground. We have maintained contact with **161** youngsters during this challenging year: **38** have showed a significant increase in their independence, **40** have made significantly more friendships and **40** have taken part in a wide range of new and innovative activities. For example, a weekly online music session with a community music student and lots of other online activities such as story-telling, games and “mad professor” experiments.

Much of the usual Volunteer supported services and peer-led activities, social, leisure and peer support groups in all our areas had to be closed during the Covid restrictions. Gradually, we reopened our **postal Audio library** from John Street. In Aberdeen, we started an innovative **Hear 2 Help Express** retubing service with two Hearing Aid Champion volunteers carrying out the work in their own homes and another four volunteer drivers providing the collection and return of the aids once fixed. In the more rural environment of Moray, we delivered a **mobile Hear 2 Help experience**, where retubing was carried out from the boot of the Hearing Aid Champion's car.

All the clubs and groups who meet regularly at our resource centres in Aberdeen Elgin and Dundee and in community venues across Tayside have been shut during this period. We introduced a telephone conference call system, "**The Party Line**" to allow people to chat together and Zoom call meetings for those who wish to join in. We were pleased to get assistance from **Connecting Scotland** and various trust funds to provide devices which we were able to distribute and support people to use.

Fundraising and Promotional Initiatives

Although Covid-19 restrictions led to the cancellation of in-person fundraising events, we held a number of successful online events and campaigns. We are also extremely grateful for the continued, generous support of individual fundraisers and donors.

We successfully applied for significant Covid-19 funding from a range of sources including successive Scottish Government funds, The Thomas Pocklington Trust, The National Emergencies Trust (through Foundation Scotland), and The NHS Grampian Endowment Fund – plus a number of smaller but vital trust and foundation emergency funds. This funding supported our running costs during the critical first months of lockdown, purchased laptops and smartphones to enable our teams to continue working remotely, and funded the adaptations we made to our Added Value Services to meet our service users' needs during this challenging time.

NESS continues to have a strong public profile and received significant coverage from local radio, and both local and national press. This included the announcement that we won the "Making the Difference" category in the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce 2021 Northern Star Business Awards – a tribute to our teams' continued remote service delivery throughout Covid-19 restrictions.

We are grateful to Quantum Communications who have taken on our Public Relations role and moved our profile to a much higher place.

NESS continues to be a member of the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, the Moray Chamber of Commerce, the Dundee and Angus Chamber of Commerce and the Scottish Council for Development and Industry (SCDI).

Facilities

We recognise the importance of maintaining our facilities to a high standard and continue to spend a proportional amount to ensure they are fit for purpose. During lockdown, staff worked from home. We were fortunate in sourcing substantial Covid funding from the Scottish Government to equip our staff to do this, and to work remotely with service users and colleagues, conducting meetings on-line.

With the easing of restrictions, we prepared our premises for safe working. Perspex screens were installed at the reception in John Street and table-top Perspex screens purchased for the meeting rooms in John Street and reception/meeting areas in our other locations. Strict procedures for cleaning were introduced with all the necessary materials provided. Personal protective equipment was made available to all our staff.

Dundee Volunteer and Voluntary Action generously reduced their rent for a while, and Angus Society for the Blind continued to fund our office space in Arbroath.

Governance

Our Board of Directors ensure the implementation of our business plan and related action plan.

During the year, Ian Herd and Stephen McPherson retired from the Board at the end of their term and Colin Boag resigned. We welcomed our new director, Carmen Irving to our board.

Our Service User Forums in Aberdeen, Moray and Dundee and Angus were suspended due to Covid restrictions.

Staffing

During the financial year we welcomed the following new staff member to our team:

Eilidh Spackman, Fieldwork Assistant, Moray.

Eddie Carroll, Hospital Information Officer, Aberdeen, received the long service award for 10 years at NESS.

NESS usually offers Social Work training placements in the organisation as well as supporting senior school pupils with short term work experience placements.

However, this was not possible due to Covid restrictions, but we look forward to reinstating these vital supports going forward.

Strategies and Campaigns

We continue to support local and national strategies and campaigns including:

- The See Hear Sensory Impairment Strategy,
- Aberdeen, Moray, Angus, Aberdeenshire and Dundee See Hear Strategies,
- The Scottish Government's plans for a National Care Service. We were involved in the initial consultation and follow up to the draft plans,
- We supported local initiatives to ensure that our service users were able to access vaccines as easily as possible,
- We worked with partners to ensure that vital Covid information was made available in accessible formats,
- Supported the development of the Scottish Sensory Hub in which SCOVl and Deaf Scotland merged with.

National Representation

We continue to represent the needs of our service users on the following groups:

- Scottish Government Cross Party Group on Visual Impairment, which moved to an online format,
- Scottish Government Cross Party Group on Deafness, which moved to an online format,
- Visionary, the UK Association for Local Societies for the Visually Impaired. We continued to be involved at board level as well as within the many online support groups that have developed over the year to support staff,
- Deaf Scotland Members Forum, moved to an online format,
- SCOVl, Scottish Council on Vision Impairment,
- Institute of Fundraising, moved to an online format,
- Thomas Pocklington Trust, moved to an online format,
- SRLDPC the registration organisation in Scotland for BSL Interpreters.

Planned Developments for 2021/22

- Reintroduce our full range of services as safely as possible,
- Put together a compelling response to the Aberdeen Health and Social Care tender,
- Negotiate an extension for our Angus Service Level Agreement,
- Put together a compelling response to the Moray Health and Social Care tender,

- Reinstate Community Fundraising Events,
- Update or replace our service user database,
- Replace our fundraising database,
- Review our organisational structures,
- To be reassessed for our Investors In People Standards,
- Continue to be involved in the Scottish Government National Care Service Plans,
- Continue to be involved with local developments and strategies.

Opening After Covid

A year ago we had tentatively opened resource centre based services from September, only to go back to lockdown on Boxing Day. Our service was never really closed and staff and some volunteers continued to work tirelessly, keeping in touch with service users and providing the best service they could under the restrictions.

We are pleased that from 1 October 2021 we have been able to open our resource centres and have club meetings again. It is great to see our service users in our premises again and people are happy to be able to meet each other again too.

We have received a lot of positive feedback from our service users and are proud to have achieved what we could in difficult circumstances.

This is what people had to say:

“I'm absolutely shocked, and most grateful, I'm to receive PIP for my daily living needs and for mobility and also I've received a lump sum, back-dated from the date when you first helped me with the call to DWP.”

“I really can't thank you enough for all your help and for giving me the confidence to keep going. I honestly can't believe it, I keep looking at the DWP letter in disbelief!”

“The team at NESS have done a fantastic job in adapting their services while navigating the restrictions caused by the pandemic.”

“I was nervous about telling future employers about my sight loss, but I used the links you gave me and took on your advice and I'm over the moon to say that I now have been offered a fantastic job... The help I received was invaluable, thank you so much.”

“You assisted a great deal in a very pleasant and approachable manner and we feel we can ask for any advice or support when required. We feel this service has been invaluable in supporting all of our family, during a very difficult time. Thank you.”

“Thank you so much for your help with the iPad; I am really enjoying it. I hope you know how much it's appreciated.”

“The service has been fantastically helpful and a great support since this [sight loss] happened to me. I would never have been able to sort all of the things out that I have without the help from my social worker. She is lovely to talk to and always cheers me up when she calls.”

“I have just been accepted to college... I am so excited, I could cry! This means so much to me. Thank you so much for your help!”

“It was great to hear about the support you provided and the activities you managed to carry out, it sounds like they have made a massive difference to the young people at such a difficult time.”

“I just had ** on the phone, singing your praises for the info you sent that keeps her informed of what's going on. She is chomping at the bit to get back to NESS!”**

“Because of NESS I don't feel alone anymore”

“I was really struggling; everyone [at NESS] was so kind and patient. NESS gave me the strength and knowledge to push through, particularly with how to approach my employer, to get the support at work I needed. I was on the verge of leaving [work].”

“I well remember the feeling of helplessness my mum and I had when we were told that her sight was unlikely to improve. Your recommendations really did make a difference to Mum's quality of life. Also, from a personal perspective, it was very comforting to know that I could call NESS for advice if I needed.”

“You were so very helpful to me with your support and guidance. I had the benefit and pleasure of having met you before covid, and your calm, knowledgeable professionalism comes over in your emails too.”

“Just wanted to let you know, I saw *** walking along the road with his wife using his long cane, he looked so confident. He was walking in front of her and she was walking fast to keep up with him, it was so nice to see him being so independent. Thank you so much for all your input.”**

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2021

	Unrestricted funds £	Restricted funds £	Total 2021 £	Total 2020 £
Income and endowments from:				
Donations and legacies	141,500	21,200	162,700	11,341
Charitable activities	200,792	1,546,482	1,747,274	1,611,014
Other trading activities	33,265	-	33,265	168,889
Investments	56,344	-	56,344	46,500
Total income	431,901	1,567,682	1,999,583	1,837,744
Expenditure on:				
Raising funds	100,903	-	100,903	167,309
Charitable activities	410,096	1,646,880	2,056,976	2,299,209
Total expenditure	510,999	1,646,880	2,157,879	2,466,518
Net gains/(losses) on investments	319,645	-	319,645	(212,676)
Net income/expenditure	240,547	(79,198)	161,349	841,450
Transfers between funds	(104,388)	104,388	-	-
Net movement in funds before other recognised gains	136,159	25,190	161,349	(841,450)
Other recognised gains: Actuarial gains on defined benefit pension plans	366,000	-	366,000	423,000
Net movement in funds	502,159	25,190	527,349	(418,450)
Reconciliation of Funds: Total funds brought forward	390,053	77,332	467,385	885,835
Total funds carried forward	892,212	102,522	994,734	467,385

Service User Numbers as at 31 March 2021

Area	B/SSI	PS/SI	N	N/HH	HH	D	DBSL	DB	H	TOTAL
Aberdeen City	275	423	313	227	880	44	122	129	0	2413
Aberdeenshire	85	93	88	7	39	6	5	16	7	346
Moray	142	122	164	130	394	21	19	100	0	1092
Angus	77	82	140	95	260	33	53	47	4	791
Dundee	304	277	201	81	556	45	99	112	10	1685
Perth & Kinross								1		1
Total	883	997	906	540	2129	149	298	405	21	6328

Abbreviations:

B/SSI = registered blind/severely sight impaired

PS/SI = registered partially sighted/sight impaired

N = severe sight loss, but not registered

N-HH = severe non registered sight loss and hearing loss

HH = hard of hearing

D = deafened

DBSL = Deaf BSL user

DB = registered blind/severely sight impaired/partially sighted/sight impaired with severe hearing loss

H = hearing, other problems such as Tinnitus, no sight problems

North East Sensory Services

is the operational name of Grampian Society for the Blind, charity registered in Scotland, SC009537, company limited by guarantee SC155630

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