

# The Acorn Cancer Support Group

## Chair of Trustees Report for 2016-2017

### Summary

In the last financial year a total number of 925 members and support team attended the 36 Acorn monthly meetings held in Huntingdon, Ramsey and St Ives. Free refreshments and lunch were provided for all. Also provided at no-cost were: 223 individual relaxation therapy treatments. Some 226 members participated in seated exercise and 27 in creative visualization. Acorn also provided 372 individual free social outings, including: boat trips for 80 with lunch at the Dolphin, 75 to a Christmas lunch also at the Dolphin, 75 to a Spring lunch at Slepe Hall and 142 to monthly film shows at the Field Lodge Care Home with lunch included. In addition, ten members attended an event at the invitation of an external sponsor, namely a Christmas lunch at the Officers Mess RAF Wyton.

The opportunity for mutual support available at meetings, along with the offer of therapies and seated exercise, plus social outings is the basis by which we continue to meet our primary objectives: which are now to alleviate members' distress, to reduce loneliness and isolation and enhance their quality of life. Members' feedback of the provision has continued to be excellent. Risk assessments have been reviewed, and where necessary updated for all venues/activity.

Recruitment of new members was higher than in 2015/16. In the 2016 calendar year we had 46 new members (94% of the target of 49 we had set). Counting over the project year 2016/17 we had 45 (92% of the target). An improving liaison with Huntingdonshire Community Cancer Network (HCCN) based at the Woodlands Centre has helped in this. HCCN are now the main source of medical advice to cancer patients, which means that our efforts now emphasise the social dimension of support to our patients and carer members (see footnote on amendment necessary to Acorn's objectives and Constitution).

The Group continued to have success in fund-raising, with donations from individuals, and grants from a wide range of groups and organisations within the local civic and business communities. Some donations were unsolicited, indicating our promotion efforts continue to have effect in the local community. Income over the year exceeded expectations and Acorn is very well placed financially to move into the 2017/18 FY.

Our achievements are described in more detail below, along with a summary of on-going plans to improve member recruitment and continuing concerns around volunteer staffing for key management posts.

### Acorn Governance

Simon Townend served as Chairman of the governing Committee throughout the year, with Colin Hyams as Vice Chairman, Janet Pyle as Treasurer, and Gordon Dyer as Secretary. Christopher Vane Percy joined the Trustees.

The usual Trustee meeting was held in April and was followed, in July, by the Annual General Meeting (AGM) at the Dolphin Hotel. The AGM was attended by 25, including 13 members, and 12 members of the Committee and support team. The October meeting was held jointly for Committee and Trustees as there was need to seek overall consensus on amendments to the Acorn Constitution<sup>1</sup>. As an experiment, the January 2017 meeting of the Committee was held as an E-exchange over the period 18-25 January. This led to the conclusion that future occasional use of this style of discussion could be worthwhile.

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<sup>1</sup> A formal amendment to the Constitution was required to reflect the fact that Acorn can no longer offer medical advice at its support meetings and now focuses on a socialisation agenda for its members. Following agreement to the proposed changes to objectives, powers and membership by a special meeting of members on 11 January, these were passed to the Charity Commission on 31 January for approval. Approval was granted on 18 February.

## Group Meetings

The monthly group meetings at Huntingdon, Ramsey and St. Ives are crucially important as the primary venues for the services we offer, enhanced by the mutual support that they also foster. They continued to run very well. There was a 5% increase in attendance over 2015/16, but overall numbers were still below the levels of 2012/13. The overall attendance over the past seven years is shown in the Table:

FY Attendance	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Total	770	1032	1079	863	853	879	925

The table shows the growth from 2010/11, with fall off in 2013/14 to an approx steady attendance for three years and now an increase in 2016/17. The fall-off in 2013/14 is linked directly to non-availability of Macmillan nurses to come to meetings. As can be seen below of attendance pattern at venues, the average attendance at both Huntingdon and St Ives increased over 2015/16.

Venue	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Huntingdon	45	37	43	35	38
Ramsey	22	16	11	13	13
St Ives	23	21	17	25	26

Of the total attendance of 925 in 2016/17, 62% were members, the remainder were our own volunteer helpers, health professionals, and therapists. Current complementary therapist appointment levels at venues remain as four at Huntingdon and one each at Ramsey and St Ives. The levels are kept under review as demand changes, though facilities at Ramsey and St Ives continue to impose constraints on expansion of individual therapy service. The number of individual relaxation therapies (aromatherapy, massage, reiki and reflexology) totalled 223. This was more than the number, 206, given in 2015/16. Seated-exercise take-up also increased to 226 from 173 in 2015/16. The activity has gained in popularity and the provision has stabilized with sessions every other month at each venue. Creative visualization, a collective relaxation therapy, was offered at Huntingdon only, when this could be fitted in. This was sometimes not possible when a combination of a talk and seated exercise was on offer. Some 27 took part in this in 2016/17, the same as in 2015/16. Overall, the total of the various therapies delivered in 2016/17 was 476, compared to 409 in 2015/16. Evaluation of the support meetings and therapies show that these activities are major contributors to Acorn meeting its primary objective of alleviating the distress of our members. To assure safety of members, risk assessments have been reviewed and/or updated for all venues/activity.

## Social Outings

Acorn social events, which are free to our members, continue to be major contributors to their quality of life, and an antidote to isolation and loneliness. A new outing, a Spring Lunch, was held in May at Slepe Hall for 75, including 4 Mayoral guests. This event received excellent reviews and we plan to repeat this in future years. We plan to use the end of the Spring lunch in 2017 as an opportunity to hold the AGM. This will allow many more members to be involved in this important event in the Acorn calendar.

Continuing with past practice, in each of the months June, July, August and September we organised a Ladybird boat trip. Each trip lasted 5 hours and carried 20 members on the River Ouse from Hartford Marina to St Ives and back, including a stop for lunch at the Dolphin Hotel. The Christmas lunch on 9 December, held at the Dolphin was also very successful, with some 75 of our members attending. A grant towards the lunch was provided by the Charity Lifeline Community Benefit Fund. Donations towards the lunch were also kindly provided by Soil Property Testing (SPT) Huntingdon, and St Ives Rotary Club.

RAF Wyton were again the generous hosts of a Christmas lunch in the Officers Mess on 1 December for 10 Acorn members. The Film Club, which is held at a twelve-seat private cinema at Field Lodge Care Home, St Ives, on the 1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday each month, continued to be a very popular. The total attendance between April 2016 and March 2017 was 142. The Film Club activity received 75% funding as part of a grant from Macmillan. The Macmillan grant also included a contribution towards a craft activity for 10 members – making a Christmas wreath – held at the Huntingdon venue in December.

## Sponsorships and Funding

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Our success in the last year would not have been possible without the generous donations/grants that we have received from the following local/national groups or organizations:

- *Hemingford Grey Gardener's Society*
- *Hemingford Grey W I Choir*
- *Huntingdon Freeman's Trust*
- *Huntingdon Cromwell Rotary*
- *Huntingdon Samuel Pepys Masons Lodge*
- *Huntingdon and St Neots Rock Choir – for permission to hold raffle/tombola and raise donations at their concert at the Hinchinbrooke Performing Arts centre*
- *Soil Property Testing Ltd Huntingdon*
- *St Ives Rotary Club – for donations and funds raised via a Garden party*
- *St Ives Mayorial fund*
- *St Ives Centre Theatre Players - the donation of ticket and raffle sales at their September Cabaret*
- *The Coffee Helpers Group, St Ives Corn Exchange Friday Coffee Stall*
- *Carolyn Parker School of Ballet*
- *Catholic Womens League, Southall Branch*
- *Charity Lifeline Community Benefit Fund (through Cambridgeshire Community Foundation)*
- *Macmillan Cancer Support*
- *Norris Museum Staff (en lieu de Christmas cards)*
- *Norwich and Peterborough Building Society, St Neots*
- *Waitrose Huntingdon, Community Green Disc Fund*

along with help in kind, from:

- *Parrot Printing – for very favourable terms in their printing services*
- *Huntingdon Community Radio (HCR104FM) – for invitations to feature in radio programmes and free advertisement of Acorn*

Our own fund raising, through having stalls at an Island Hall Open Day, Huntingdon Riverside Gala and Carnival, St Ives Corn Exchange Santas Grotto event, and through an event by Cally Bussetil at her home, produced £500. Repayment of Giftaid through HMRC amounted to £477.

Membership of [localgiving.org](http://localgiving.org) was a major channel for income, providing £1668. This continued to be stimulated by a matched-funding period for regular on-line donations by direct debit made through the website [www.localgiving.org](http://www.localgiving.org). We had 7 donors sign up for a £10 a month scheme, which led to the doubling of their donations for three months. The income figure includes funds already received for Rhyse Plummer-coles' intention to run the London marathon on 23 April in sponsorship of Acorn.

We also received a donation from an unexpected source outside of our area. One of our members, Ged Dempsey, was driving in London and listening to a phone-in programme on BBC Radio 5 and a discussion surrounding large national charities and how they incurred large administrative costs. He phoned-in and made an on-air case for small charities like Acorn who depend on volunteers to run it and incur minimum personnel costs. His intervention subsequently led to a donation of £100 from the Catholic Women's League, Southall Branch. We are also very grateful to Ged as, following his recommendation and our subsequent submission to the Mason's Tercentenary Charity Fund, Acorn is in line to receive a donation in the 2017/18 FY of either £4000 or £6000. The amount will be the outcome of an on-line public vote via the Mason's website, Further details of this process are awaited.

In addition, we have benefitted greatly from donations from individuals in the local community. These personal donations of both gifts of money and in-kind gifts (cakes and refreshments), have all added to our sustainability for the future. It is gratifying that donations have also been made by our own members which confirm that the support we provide is of considerable value to them. We would like to place on record our sincere gratitude to these grant providers and donors, which enables us to continue providing support to those affected by cancer without worrying about funds unduly. This appreciation is also highlighted on our Facebook page [www.facebook.com/siacsg](http://www.facebook.com/siacsg) and website [www.acornsupportgroup.org.uk](http://www.acornsupportgroup.org.uk).

[www.localgiving.com](http://www.localgiving.com). We had 7 donors sign up for the £10 a month scheme, which led to the doubling of their donations for three months. But the largest single source of funds through localgiving.com was from the effort of Angie Lambert who ran in the Cambridge Half Marathon on 28 February. Her sponsorship, including money donated off-line, after matched funds of £500 given by her employers, ARM holdings, raised over £1700 for Acorn. In addition one of our members, Wendy Richmond, is planned to do a zip-wire descent in North Wales on 10 April. The money raised from this will be over £700 but some will show in the accounts for 2016/17.

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### **Acorn Profile**

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Our strategy for increasing awareness as a means to attract new members has continued to include the following elements:

- submissions for grants to local funding sources, including civic bodies and leaders, lodges and rotary clubs.
- in thanking donors, inviting them to act as “ambassadors”, in the sense of telling others they know who are affected by cancer, about Acorn and what we can offer.
- attending Concerts and other fund-raising events, which provided opportunities to speak directly to members of the public who attend.
- maintaining good relations with Huntingdon Community Radio (HCR104FM) and responding to any opportunity they offer to speak about Acorn on the radio. Last year this included three “Over to You” programmes.
- articles in the Hunts Post, thanking sponsors and stressing Acorn’s value to those affected by cancer.
- placing leaflets and posters in surgeries in the area. In several cases surgeries carry Powerpoint-type pages relating to Acorn on their moving screens.
- stressing in promotion activity that Acorn is not like some other support groups, e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous, where the image prevails of a newcomer needing to speak up and say why they have come. We counter this by saying that we ask no questions of a newcomer but simply welcome them, offer tea or coffee and then introduce them to one other person. What they share is up to them.
- maintaining relationship and contact with HCCN. A leaflet setting out the distinctive and complementary natures of HCCN and Acorn is available. This is held and distributed through the HCCN area of Woodlands.
- regular updating news on both our website and Facebook page. The Facebook page continues to extend its reach.
- responding to any opportunity to promote Acorn locally. In addition to the Hunts Post, adverts have appeared, and repeats planned in the Godmanchester “Bridge” magazine, in the St Ives “Now” magazine with others planned, including for the Huntingdon equivalent.

The efforts we continue to make to enhance our profile in the community at large are showing signs of positive effect. All the attempts to promote Acorn are on-going. Recruitment of new members continues to gradually increase. In 2016/17, 45 new members (28 patients and 17 carers) joined Acorn. This compared to 31 new members (21 and 10) in 2015/16, 30 new members (23 and 7) in 2014/15, and 28 new members (22 and 6) in 2013/14.

Our continuing drive to find new members is reinforced by the Macmillan estimate that 2.5 million people were living with cancer in the UK in 2015. Our recruitment is a very small fraction of those who will be affected by cancer in our local area<sup>2</sup>. Acorn has the willingness, finance and capacity to help more families affected by cancer, and this is where our efforts remain concentrated.

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<sup>2</sup> Given the Hunts DC 2013 estimate of 172,000 population, and the latest UK population estimate of 64.5 million, this equates to 6,800 in Hunts DC area. Separating out the area covered by St Neots Acorn reduces the estimate to 4,000. Further reductions to allow for our remit of adults only (say to 3,000), and then to cater for the “position in the recovery journey or degree of appropriateness” for any given cancer patient to attend our groups (say 10% only), would seem to suggest that 300 cancer patients in our catchment area could benefit from our service. If, say, one third of these have carers who are willing/able/can be convinced of the value of the group, then we arrive at 400 as a long term target for support arrangements. Given this estimate our on-going target to recruit c.50 new members per year is a conservative one.

## *Thank You*

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Our charity continues to depend crucially on the input from our volunteer team, especially those cheerful and friendly helpers who make drinks and get lunches ready at our group meetings. Without this sterling effort our group would be much less of a family. Thanks are due to Simon Townend and Shirley Hand for running the Huntingdon Group. Julia Mitchell remains the cornerstone of activity at Ramsey and St Ives, and in many other capacities, including brilliant organization of the boat trips and the Christmas and Spring lunches.

We also want to give an enormous vote of thanks to Val Zarno, the Acorn lead therapist, who after 17 years of many contributions and dedicated service to Acorn has decided to step down. She will be sadly missed by all members for the kindness, gentleness, and concern she had shown to them over the years. Thanks also to the whole team of therapists for the very welcome relaxation treatments they provide. Our seated exercise instructors bring fun to everything they do. The excellent evaluation reviews that we get from our members are testimony to the value of all these therapy sessions.

Finally, thanks are due to all members of the governance team for their contributions during the year: Simon Townend for chairing the Committee and Trustees group, and Colin Hyams for acting as Vice Chairman and webmaster over the past year. I would also particularly like to thank my wife, Jan Pyle, colleague administrator and Treasurer, for the immense amount of time and input she gives to the group. The success of the group has benefitted enormously by the efficient way we two have been able to work together to manage the day-to-day activity of the charity. Our replacement is long overdue and putting succession arrangements in place remains crucial.

*Gordon Dyer MBE, Secretary, The Acorn Cancer Support Group.*  
6 May 2017

Report approved by the Charity's Trustees at their meeting on 3 May 2017.

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