

A Report on the
Autumn Workshop, 16th November, 1974.

"The Work of the Local Associations
and National/Local Relationships"

Sir George Haynes - Vice-President - gave the opening address.

He felt sure that members had gathered together for the Workshop in order to clarify vision and to achieve a sense of sharing.

The strength of an organisation such as ASBAH was based on mutual understanding of what the movement was all about and an acceptance of the importance of the varied roles within it.

Communication, using a variety of modes both within and outside, was essential to successful operation. One of ASBAH's vehicles of communication was its magazine. Sir George said how good he found it and he believed the secrets of its success were that it was simple, short and direct. It was not all inward-looking and had a circulation of over 9,000.

Communication outside the movement was essential and must involve joining with others and working co-operatively with them. At no time can it be taken for granted that communication is good. There must be a constant watch kept on the attitudes which are springing up both within the Association and in relation to a wider public. Criticism there must be, but it must be informed and constructive. Always one should put oneself in the other person's shoes. Out of a fusion of understanding, greater bonds and strength would grow.

Much of the work of a voluntary association is formulated through meetings. Sir George asked that all should share his belief that "every meeting is a new beginning and every committee is an adventure in the Cause". With such a philosophy new strength would be given to all concerned with the Association's life and work. It would prosper by virtue of a great sense of unity and determination to do the utmost for all who need help and care, wherever they may be.

The Workshop divided into parallel sessions:

Group for Chairmen - Leader Miss G. Bennett.

The role of Chairman of a Local Association was more all-embracing than purely the chairing of meetings, important though it is to study how to do this well. The Chairman needs to "look inward" that is, he needs to see that the individual members of his committee can make their full contribution. He needs to make communication between

them easy, accepting that people have differing abilities and in consequence have varying roles to play within the group. The Chairman needs to be "outward"-looking, to keep constantly in mind both the objectives and the progress being made towards them. He needs to keep himself free of emotion, which in itself calls for self-analysis. The importance of contacts both within the Association, with membership and with the National Office, as well as with Local Government, local industry and local voluntary organisations must be in the forefront of the Chairman's mind.

Equally, he needs to work very closely with the Honorary Secretary and to see that there is a reasonable spread of load amongst the other committee members. He should be the link with the Trustees, and lead the officers in the formation of Association policy, including the use of monies and resources.

In the discussion which followed, the differences in the nature and groupings of Local Associations was very evident, not least because of the varying sizes covered. An awareness arose of the need for neighbouring Associations to be in touch with each other. The need for close co-operation between the National Association and the Local Associations was emphasised and it was appreciated that this should be a two-way traffic. The use of the Council, as well as visits from the National staff, would contribute to an ever improving understanding, in addition to the written word.

Group for Honorary Secretaries - Leader Miss M. E. Oughtred.

The term "secretary" was somewhat misleading, as it could describe anybody from the Chief Executive of the United Nations to a humble clerk. In Association context, the Honorary Secretary is really the organiser of a Local Association who, working closely with the Chairman, seeks to ensure that the Association is effective. The Secretary needs to be available, to deal with enquiries efficiently and promptly, to be a caring person. He or she also needs to have the power of delegation and at the same time to be able to co-ordinate. He should know his strengths and weaknesses, and therefore when and how to enlist help. Some duties could be delegated to a despatch secretary or a membership secretary or a visitor of families.

The Secretary is the convener of both General and Committee Meetings, involving the arrangement of the venue and the sending out of a calling notice, including an agenda. (This should preferably be done in consultation with the Chairman). The work of the Association needs to have shape and purpose and therefore the Chairman and Secretary need to understand each other well and to know where they are going. The nub of the work is the support of families, and the effectiveness of this should be under constant review. A simple clear system of records needs to be maintained, and the Association should provide appropriate equipment.

The Secretary and Chairman should be well known to local statutory and voluntary societies, so that they may be consulted when necessary. The Secretary should be well informed of sources of help - legal, welfare provision - and have a system for recording such information, e.g. holiday ideas, addresses for help, how to claim assistance etc. Such matter can then be passed on to a successor.

It is clear that this is a very demanding assignment, and it is therefore essential that the Secretary should have help with some of the work. Too often Honorary Secretaries give up through over-work, the Association thus often losing a very valuable member. It is strongly advised that there should not be more than one office-bearer in any household.

The arrangement of the Annual Meeting and of General Meetings of the Association, use of speakers, films etc. needs to be co-ordinated between the officers of the Committee in order to keep the work of the Association full of vitality. At the end of the day every Secretary will meet with many disappointments. The job concerns people, many of whom may need more support than they can reciprocate.

In the discussion which followed, many people contributed from their own experiences, and it was evident that much hard work was in progress. The need for close co-operation had been carefully noted. There was some discussion about the introduction of part-time secretaries to help with some of the day-to-day work. Where this had been done, the results had proved very satisfactory.

Group for Honorary Treasurers - Leader Mr. F. G. Armour.

It was stressed at the outset that the Treasurer of any Local Association had two over-riding duties in law. Firstly, it was his (or her) duty to ensure that funds were properly used "for charitable purposes only". Failing this, it might be said that money had been received by the charity under false pretences. Although the Trustees and the whole Committee also carried this responsibility, it was the Treasurer who had the duty of applying this rule from day to day.

Secondly, the Treasurer would be the person to deal with the Auditor's queries at the end of each financial year, and hence he must ensure that adequate records were kept and retained, to explain all the financial transactions. The Auditor himself would advise on the detailed records to be kept, if asked to do so.

As a certain amount of special knowledge was required to carry out the Treasurer's duties, especially as the organisation grew in size, this was often a point at which some outside help could be brought in to strengthen the Committee as a whole; e.g. someone in the local Bank or Accountant's office would often be found willing to become Honorary Treasurer.

Specific problems were raised and dealt with regarding the detailed work, such as the operation of various kinds of Bank or Trustee Savings Bank Accounts, the payment of bills and retention of vouchers, the importance of acknowledging all donations and doing so in an informative manner to encourage further interest, and the problems presented by the need to ensure as far as possible the proper security of all monies raised, often by volunteers in distant areas.

The Group then considered the proper use of those funds which were not immediately required, including first the detailed question of calculating how much money fell into this category. The importance of proper investment of funds was stressed, and it was illustrated how easily the Association's income could be substantially increased as a result. The "pooling" of funds via the Local Associations' Investment Scheme was discussed, and it was shown how the increased annual income so arising often exceeded that earned at several "Sales", but with no work involved! In this context, the Group also discussed the use of funds, and whether large surplus funds should exist at all in the hands of a charity, unless a specific project was in view.

The importance of the Treasurer not being related in any way to the Chairman or the Secretary was stressed, as were the dangers to the Treasurer himself if blank cheques were counter-signed in advance by (say) the Chairman as a matter of routine. The second signature was required for the Treasurer's own protection as regards each payment made.

The Group then dealt with various detailed queries regarding Income Tax on trading profits, Deeds of Covenant, VAT etc.

Group for Committee Members - Leader Mr. H.D. Macfarlane.

The Group discussed the various roles which the committee members played, which included help with public relations, the finding of other volunteers, help with fund-raising, ensuring that all age-groups were catered for, accepting assignments in connection with special meetings, e.g. the Annual General Meeting, representing particular points of view, helping with the orientation of new members, and taking a share in representing the Association in the community at large or on organisations in the field of disability and welfare.

During the discussion the question of membership of the Association came under review. It was important that there should be a welcome for those who wished to serve the Association but who did not come into it by virtue of being the parent of a handicapped child. Associations which had a good proportion of "non-parent" members found them a great strength.

The benefit to Associations of staff, full or part-time, was agreed, though there was anxiety about how this could be financed. Members recognised that there was a

tendency for some Local Associations to be somewhat isolationist in their outlook, and that there was scope for much more participation in groups within the community with similar concerns

Group on Appeal and Publicity - Leader Mrs. K. M. White.

Mrs White outlined some of the essential good practices of publicity and fund-raising.

The need for steady income could be met if a list of annual subscribers was built up and gradually extended. Even in these days people were willing to give in this way and the welfare of handicapped children was of concern.

There was discussion about publicity material, and the importance of well designed and produced posters, leaflets and other literature was stressed.

Some areas featured one kind of fund-raising - say in Clubs - which would not be possible in other districts, so there must be variety and full development of local interests

The possibility of publicity kits being available to Local Associations from ASBAH was mooted, and those present welcomed the suggestion.

The Role of the National Association.

It was the National Associations's responsibility:

- (i) To care for, help and advise all those with spina bifida and hydrocephalus and their families.
- (ii) To give support and advice to Local Associations.
- (iii) To encourage and sponsor research.

The National Association needed to be the voice of the movement as a whole to Government Departments and to national voluntary organisations, especially when studies into the needs of the disabled were being conducted. Contacts with the Royal Family, including our Patron, and with the President and Vice-Presidents always needed to be made through the National Office. The Association sought to centralise information for the public, for families and for those professionally concerned, in particular through publications and LINK, as well as by correspondence. The Association sought to be informed on new legislation, sources of help, holiday centres and residential placements, training and employment opportunities, and to make this information available where needed. Specialised knowledge regarding welfare, house adaptations and many other things could be obtained through the national body.

The National Association needed to be aware of problems and trends, and to represent these as appropriate, in order to contribute to an ever-improving situation.

The promotion and sponsoring of research needed to be

nationally undertaken, in order to avoid duplication of effort and to ensure careful scrutiny of the projects, and here the Medical Committee played a very important role.

The Association was the link with work in other countries.

The National Association's fund-raising and publicity must be geared both to meet needs as they arose and to provide assistance to Local Associations in these fields, and to extend the knowledge of spina bifida and hydrocephalus to the widest possible public.

In order to carry out these responsibilities, the National Association needed the full support of its constituent parts (the Local Associations). There needed to be regular pooling of ideas and consultation about new projects, and above all, mutual trust.

Final Session.

Points arising from the reports given in the final session showed a general recognition that there were no short cuts to the commitment of those responsible for the Association's work both locally and nationally, and the quality of service they must render for the Association to be fully effective. Communication played an important part and needed to be a priority at all levels.

It was stressed that the coming together of Local Associations at the Council was a particularly good opportunity for the interchange of ideas. The importance of representatives reporting back to their Local Associations was emphasised. Where the representative/s were not already on the Committee, it was suggested that their co-option should be considered.

More than one group felt that there was scope for more staff in the field and spontaneously suggested that funding for this both could and should come, in part at least, from Local Associations.

It was considered that the Association should keep under review the implementation of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act, the function of the Family Fund, housing needs for members, and access. In order to be effective the fullest information was needed. Individual programmes should be investigated by Local Associations, and when appropriate, referred to Devonshire Street for either investigation or incorporation into any representations that might require to be made. A number of helpful comments of a more detailed nature were noted.

The importance of research was generally recognised, and everything that could be done at all levels to encourage an expanded programme was to be welcomed.

Mr. Tallamy thanked the members for the enthusiastic and vital way in which they had entered into the day's proceedings, and expressed thanks to those who had served as group leaders.