



**Family Report 2020-2021**  
**1st April 2020 - 31st August 2021**



*Improving the lives of autistic people and their families  
and empowering them to reach their  
full potential*

Daisy Chain Project (Teesside) | Calf Fallow Lane | Norton | Stockton-on-Tees | TS20 1PF  
Registered Charity No. 1109792 | Company Limited by Guarantee 4763989

# Foreword from Head of Adult Services



As I am sitting here writing this foreword, I cannot quite believe how far we have come in the past 18 months since the pandemic hit and we went into our first lockdown. During this time, Daisy Chain has achieved significant growth and expansion of our adult services despite working under such unprecedented, unpredictable, and challenging circumstances. To highlight this growth, I am now going to provide you with some figures which really do speak for themselves...

In the financial year 2018/2019 Daisy Chain provided support to approximately 50 adults. The following year, 2019/2020, that number rose to just under 90. But for the most recent financial year, April 2020 – March 2021, Daisy Chain provided support to more than 400 adults which is an increase of around 345%.

This is just the beginning. For a long time, Daisy Chain has existed to support children and families – a vital service that is hugely needed and valued by all who access it. However, autistic children grow into autistic adults and very few autism specific adult services exist within the community. The ongoing enrichment of our services for adults will continue to tackle this inequality, through the creation of a holistic hub, where adults can feel safe to access support for a wide variety of the challenges faced in adult life. From loneliness and isolation to mental health to applying for jobs and even moving into independent living – Daisy Chain will be there.

The key theme running throughout all our adult services will always be this:  
**empowerment.**

Autistic adults are individuals with diverse talents, dreams, opinions, rights, and ambitions. Through our support, we hope that adults develop skills, self-worth, motivation and feel thoroughly empowered to step outside of their comfort zone and stride confidently towards their goals.

To everyone who has supported Daisy Chain throughout this pandemic I extend a warm and sincere thank you. But most importantly, to all the fantastic adults who access our services - thank you for bringing so much joy and inspiration into our lives and for being our constant teachers. Be proud of yourself for getting through the challenges of the last 18 months. Be proud of any progress you make, however small. And of course, be proud of who you are.

*Hayley Matthews*

*Head of Adult Services*

# Our Impact

Over 800 children,  
young people and  
adults  
accessed our  
services within the  
reporting period

We provided over  
2,863 hours worth  
of bespoke  
placement time to  
schools last year

13 adults  
accessed our  
employability  
services during the  
period

Supported over  
4,559 families

28 adults were  
supported as part  
of our adult clubs  
and activities

We provided 150  
professionals with virtual  
autism training (schools,  
corporates and employers)

12 adults were supported  
through our new housing,  
benefits and independent  
living service

380 adults and  
young people  
received wellbeing  
support

20 adults took part in our  
upcycling project

90% of wellbeing service users said the support they  
received had a positive impact on their wellbeing and  
90% said it had helped them to feel more positive

# Daisy Chain COVID response



On 23rd March 2020 Boris Johnson announced a UK wide lockdown and told us that we must stay home. From that moment on, we were thrown into an unprecedented time of change, challenge, and uncertainty. It is a time in our history that we will never forget and that will leave a lasting imprint on us all.

Thankfully, Daisy Chain had already carried out emergency planning and in true Daisy Chain style, we rallied together and went above and beyond to ensure that we could continue to be there for our service users and their families. This included investing approximately £30,000 in PPE, screens, room dividers and other safety measures to ensure our site was ready to open as soon as it was safe to do so and re-directing all of our available resources to crisis support to allow us to still be there for those who needed us the most.

Financially, we were hit hard, with the closure of our superstore resulting in substantial financial losses and we were forced to furlough the majority of our team. Despite this within a matter of days we introduced a new free telephone support line and retained a small team of dedicated staff who worked tirelessly throughout lockdown to provide crisis support, signposting, strategies and resources to autistic young people, adults and their families. In a four-month period the team supported 881 unique families, young people and adults which showed us just how vital this new service was and motivated us to seek funding to ensure its continuation throughout the subsequent lockdowns and beyond. Additional funding was also secured from Mind to allow us to introduce a much-needed wellbeing service which launched in June 2021.

As the country slowly started to open up again we were thrilled to welcome service users back on site after carrying out a comprehensive risk assessment to ensure we were able to do so safely. By making full use of our amazing facilities we were able to accommodate 428 children and young people during the six weeks holiday who between them accessed a wide range of activities including cinema nights, silent discos, birds of prey presentations, archery and drumming workshops.

We continue to work hard to ensure our most vital services are able to continue whilst still keeping our staff and service users safe. We have had to make difficult choices at times but stand by our decision to prioritise our most vulnerable families. We have also launched new services including an exciting and innovative housing, benefits and independent living service and our very popular Rising Stars performing arts offer funded by BBC Children in Need.

The pandemic has challenged us all, and it has not been easy. It has forced us to work around restrictions that two years ago we could never have imagined. We have worn masks, been separated from our loved ones, stayed home and made impossible decisions around what services to close and what to keep open. It has pushed us to be innovative, flexible and creative, to support each other and to focus on what really matters. We are still here, we have survived and we have continued to support those that need us the most through this most difficult time. And for that we are incredibly grateful to our team of hard working and dedicated staff and to our autistic service users and their families for their support, understanding, patience and gratitude. Thank you for being there with us and we look forward to continuing to support you for many years to come.

*Jennifer Hewitt*

*Head of Children & Family Services*

# Safeguarding Statement

We believe that everybody has a responsibility to promote the welfare of all children, young people and at-risk adults. In order to ensure we remain a safe organisation we are committed to carrying out an annual safeguarding audit which focuses on the following four themes:



Our most recent audit was carried out in October 2020 and resulted in the following key actions:

1. Increased training for staff and volunteers with an emphasis on keeping service users safe on-line
2. The purchasing and installation of a new safeguarding CRMS system
3. The purchasing and installation of a new electric gate (to replace the current main gate) which will be kept closed at all times.

To find out more about what Daisy Chain is doing to keep your child safe and to read our Child and Adult safeguarding policies please visit the safeguarding section of our website at <https://www.daisychainproject.co.uk/safeguarding>.

## You said, we did

### You said: 'Improve support for children with higher needs'



We did:

- Introduced weekly high needs after school club
- Introduced weekly free high needs holiday club funded by BBC Children in Need
- Increased holiday offer to include high needs soft play and messy play
- Invested in additional training for staff
- Completed review of site and secured funding to install new electric gate and a changing places disability toilet

### You said: 'More respite for parents'



We did:

- Increased holiday offer to include additional short breaks sessions for children who require 1:1 or 1:2 support
- Secured funding from BBC Children in Need to provide free overnight residentials to locations such as Peat Rigg and Centre Parcs

### You said: 'Provide our children with opportunities to experience new things'



We did:

- Introduced a range of free performing arts based after school and holiday activities which has given our children and young people the opportunity to experience movement, drama and sound as well as learn new skills such as script writing and video editing
- Introduced a range of new pop up clubs & activities including 'cooking', 'art & mindfulness', 'forest school' and 'barn club'
- Secured funding to provide free trips and activities in the school holidays including adventure activities such as archery and rock climbing

### You said: 'Extend support to children who are undergoing diagnosis'



We did:

- Secured funding to ensure children who are undergoing diagnosis can access free BBC Children in Need funded holiday clubs and activities
- Secured funding to ensure children who are undergoing diagnosis can access free performing arts based after school and holiday clubs
- Extended holiday offer to children who are undergoing diagnosis

## Children's case study

# Theresa's Story

**Theresa is the mother of Fraser. She would like to share her experience in the hope that all parents who read it will gain an insight into the reality of loving and caring for a child pre-autism diagnosis and post-autism diagnosis.**



Our journey over recent years has largely been sad and at many times very lonely. The outcome over recent months, supported by Daisy Chain, has given myself and Fraser hope. I now see that there is goodness and kindness in our society and it exists through charitable organisations like Daisy Chain.

I have cared for my son for 9 years alone. Fraser required support at primary school and the ASD assessment process began there. It was a long process and took 4 years to complete. Fraser is in mainstream education with a separate unit to support ASD students. He coped well in year 7 and 8 because he was in small class groups of 10 children. When Fraser moved into year 9 with class groups upto 30 children he began to struggle.

He could not verbally explain to me how he was feeling, his behaviour changed significantly. He was overwhelmed. He stopped going into the playground and sat in the Endeavour Unit. He became more and more isolated. He started to say he felt sick at school and wanted to come home.

Our journey deteriorated quickly when he started Year 10 - it was the 1st year of his GCSE studies. He went back to school after being in lockdown for months. He could not cope.

**“As soon as we went to Daisy Chain, Fraser has felt safe and calm.”**

At this point there were no conversations about support. The school believed it was some kind of rebellion. It was far more than that.

Instead of going to school one day, my son went to the River Tees for hours in the freezing cold and when found was full of mud and extremely disoriented. He was in tears and highly distressed. He just kept asking me why he felt like this. He did not know why he felt so depressed. It was truly heartbreaking. CAMHS crisis teams became involved and Fraser was assessed by CAMHS in 2021 after lockdown March / April. The educational environment was identified as the cause and encouraged Fraser to be with Daisy Chain so he could gain a better understanding of himself and autism.

The school put a number of measures in place - a reduced school day and one less GCSE. It wasn't enough. In April Fraser was found to be googling (whilst in a safe environment) how to take his own life. Fraser's anxiety levels resulted in him developing a severe and intense rash caused through raised adrenaline levels. The Head of SENCO at Fraser's school engaged with Daisy Chain and agreed a 2 day per week placement for Fraser. This is where our journey began to change.

Fraser was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome May 2019. As soon as we went to Daisy Chain - from the first day Fraser has felt safe and calm. He talks about autism and what it means within his life. He has a smile on his face when I see him. He is more positive about himself. His rash has disappeared. He talks favourably about his GCSE studies (now reduced to 5).

I cannot begin to understand the skills that the team at Daisy Chain have. They all have a calm and inclusive approach not just to Fraser but to me also.

My son and I have had at times a very painful journey. I count my blessings every day since Daisy Chain has been part of our lives. A thank you is not enough so I will enrol to volunteer to give something back to the people who have been there to help and guide.

## Adult's case study

# Jasmine's Story



**Jasmine, a young autistic woman, describes her journey from an anxious employability service user to becoming a more optimistic and confident Daisy Chain employee.**

When I first joined Daisy Chain's employability service in 2019 I had just finished university. My whole purpose of going to university in the first place was to avoid the world of work – I just wasn't ready for it yet. I joined the employability service because I was looking for work experience but without the pressure of a regular job.

In the past, whenever I was talking to people who were trying to help me with my CV they always told me to hide a certain aspect of my autism until after I had been employed. It felt like I couldn't be honest, and I didn't feel like that was fair to me or to them. Yes, I do have anxiety – and I felt like it would be helpful for employers to know that, but I was worried that if I told people in an interview then it would make people less likely to hire me.

At the point when I first joined the employability service my self-esteem and mental health was very low. I only had a small group of friends. I couldn't go for any interviews because I would just have a breakdown. It was very intimidating. I didn't know how to talk to anyone and I had pretty much no social skills. At this point in my life, I was not optimistic about the future. In fact, I think I was just dreading the future. I didn't feel mature enough to get a job, I didn't feel like an adult.

When I first started with Daisy Chain, I thought that maybe I would be there a couple of weeks but the team helped me a lot – they made me feel comfortable and I didn't feel like I was under any pressure to perform. They worked with me on my CV skills, interview skills and the more I got to know them the easier it got. They helped me prepare for talking to strangers and they also helped me with my social skills and interpersonal skills.

**“Working here – this is something I actually find enjoyable and that makes me happy.”**

I think it is so important to have specific support for autistic adults, from professionals who understand autism. It can be very intimidating in the workplace to hide certain aspects of your autism so if there is someone there who understands it you feel like you can be more yourself and you don't feel as much pressure to pretend to be someone you are not.

*And now, fast forward two years and Jasmine is employed by Daisy Chain.* I work in the e-commerce team primarily doing ebay listings. We get a lot of donations of goods that are higher price items and it is my job to list them which includes writing descriptions, pricing, taking the pictures and things like that. I never would have imagined two years ago that I was going to be able to get work. I definitely think that the support and experience of the employability service has had a positive impact on my mental health. I have gained a lot of confidence since I have started coming to Daisy Chain. I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for the employability team.

I definitely feel more optimistic about the future. Working here – this is something I actually find enjoyable and that makes me happy. If I do end up moving on, I feel more confident about looking for and seeking other types of work.

I would recommend Daisy Chain's employability service to other autistic adults. The team are very patient and if you are struggling, they will give you as much time as you need. Being a part of this service has helped me to grow as an adult and as an autistic person. I have learned to understand myself a lot more.

To find out more about our employability service, get in touch at [employability@daisychainproject.co.uk](mailto:employability@daisychainproject.co.uk)

# New Services - Adults



## Housing, Benefits and Independent Living

In February 2021 we launched our new Housing, Benefits, and Independent Living Service. This innovative and empowering service offers free and impartial advice, advocacy, and support to improve the income of autistic adults and assist them in achieving their independent living goals.

Our experienced Housing, Benefits and Independent Living Officer provides support with tenancy applications, benefits checks, benefits and grant applications, challenging benefit decisions, support to sustain tenancy, and much more. We also offer small group independent living skills workshops covering topics such as planning and cooking easy meals, budgeting and money management and staying safe while living independently.

The service is working closely with social services across all the Tees Valley boroughs to ensure that when an adult moves from a supportive environment into an independent living situation that their needs are assessed and any necessary support is put in place.

We are incredibly proud of what this service has already achieved and are excited about further service growth and development. To find out more or to refer into this service please email us via [myhome@daisychainproject.co.uk](mailto:myhome@daisychainproject.co.uk)

In the first 6 months we...

- Supported 54 individual adults over 86 unique cases
- Raised more than £140,000 in unclaimed benefits for autistic clients
- 6 adults have been supported to move out of their foster/family home and into independent living
- 7 adults have been supported to move from unstable living situations with a potential for homelessness into stable living situations

*"I was new to single life and didn't have a clue with regards to how to get a house or what benefits I should be getting. The team gave me all of the advice that I needed and pointed me in the right direction when I didn't know. Without the service I'd still be sofa surfing and struggling. The service helped me, it's really friendly, supportive, lots of information available and lots of help available. I would recommend it." – client P*

Client P was homeless and sofa surfing when he referred into our service. He has since been supported to secure his own home/tenancy in an area that is familiar to him. He was also supported to secure grant funding for decorating and carpets for his new home.

# New Services - Adults



## Wellbeing Service

Launched in the midst of the very first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, our wellbeing support has proved to be incredibly impactful and absolutely vital. Staff delivered much needed virtual wellbeing support to autistic young people and adults via telephone and video calls. With the easing of lockdown restrictions, the service moved to face-to-face delivery.

Thanks to further funding, we were delighted to be able to extend our wellbeing offer into more complex support through the recruitment of a qualified counsellor and the ability to offer more complex case support. To date, this new funding has allowed us to provide wellbeing support and counselling to more than 50 young people and adults over more than 250 support contacts.

For more information or to refer into the service, please email [wellbeing@daisychainproject.co.uk](mailto:wellbeing@daisychainproject.co.uk).

In the first 12 months we..

- Provided support to almost 500 individuals
- Received 92% 5 out of 5 reviews
- Received feedback from 90% of respondents saying that the service had helped them to feel more positive and had improved their overall wellbeing

*"The wellbeing service has helped me by giving me growing confidence, almost like a flower growing from a seed, to live more independently, less anxiously and to be more aware of my struggles (as well as the achievements and positives I have in my life). I feel like the piece of the jigsaw that was missing has been found, making me whole again. I am extremely grateful for the help the wellbeing service has given me and the tools I have learnt to help me live a happy and fulfilling life."*

*"I have tried some of the anxiety strategies, such as grounding/ mindfulness and this has helped me manage anxiety in college. I feel better at applying how to prepare for volunteering and now I want to actually do it."*

# New Services - Children



## Rising Stars

Our new Rising Stars project aims to provide a range of free, engaging performing arts-based after school and holiday clubs for our children and young people. State-of-the-art equipment has been purchased and we have recruited a new team of performing arts professionals to support our budding young actors, videographers, dancers and performers to develop their confidence and make new friends.

At the end of the project in June 2022 the team will produce a showreel to showcase the talents of everyone involved and a festival of performances will be hosted at Daisy Chain for parents and friends to enjoy. To date more than 80 children & young people have engaged with the project and sessions on offer have included the more traditional movement, sound and drama alongside more specialist sessions such as script writing, musical theatre and comedy. The team have also recently taken a group of children and young people on a field trip to Northern Stage to see how a real theatre works behind the scenes. To find out more about this exciting new project and sign your child up please visit: <https://www.daisychainproject.co.uk/stars>

*"My son absolutely loves the Rising stars sessions and is really enjoying them. They are helping his confidence and he looks forward to them every week. They give him the opportunity to do music, singing and dancing, which he really enjoys, in an environment appropriate to him. He is in a familiar and safe environment at Daisy Chain, and being in a small group really allows him to express himself. He is loving them!"*

*"My son is getting so much from these sessions - thank you for the hard work that goes into them. His confidence is real when he leaves you on a Saturday - I rarely see that."*

# New Services - Children



## Virtual Support

When the pandemic hit and we were forced to close our face to face services down almost overnight we immediately responded by setting up a new free telephone support line which was manned by a small team of dedicated staff members from their kitchens and living rooms. Demand for this service was high with the team supporting 881 unique families in the first four months of the pandemic.

Initially the service was restricted to families living in the Tees Valley but in September 2020 we were able to secure funding to increase our support to families across the country. To date the team have provided crisis support, signposting, strategies and resources to 2175 families with calls coming in from as far away as Suffolk and Devon and we are pleased to say we have recently secured funding which will allow the continuation of this essential new service into 2022 and beyond. If you or someone you know are in need of support please reach out to this service by calling 0800 031 5445.

*"I just wanted to drop you a note to say thank-you so much for offering your time to speak to both me and my son over the past couple of difficult months. He appreciated the initial calls and it was really helpful having you as a third person to help him communicate to me some positive changes we could make at home to support him. Daisy Chain is such an amazing support to our family and I feel very grateful to have such an organisation within our area."*

What's next?

## Adult's Services

### Adult Clubs and Activities



From September on-wards we will be launching our newly refreshed adult clubs and activities offer. Our weekly Monday Chill and Chat Club will continue but with the addition of a second club on a Tuesday evening – we are thrilled to be able to offer more adults the opportunity to access this much-loved service. We are also excited to be launching our new community-connect group, which, with the support of Daisy Chain staff, will empower adults to socialise, develop friendships and gain confidence within community venues. Finally, after a successful trial period, we are delighted to confirm that our new Dungeons and Dragons club will be continuing. This well-received club will continue to run on Thursday evenings over 12-week blocks.

For any further information about our adult clubs and activities or to enquire about a place, please email [info@daisychainproject.co.uk](mailto:info@daisychainproject.co.uk).

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### Adult Social Media



Daisy Chain's adult services have grown exponentially over the last 18-months and we want our social media streams to reflect that. We are currently at the very beginning stages of a project to develop and launch social media platforms dedicated solely to adult services and run by autistic adults. Once live, these social media streams will provide a space to share content and information, generate discussion and create a community network of peer support for autistic adults. Look out for more information about this exciting development over the coming months.

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### Adult Voice



One of our aims within adult services is to empower, listen and respond to the voices of autistic adults and we have made a commitment to developing and embedding communication channels that will allow us to do this. We want the voices of autistic adults to play a key role in strategic decision making and service delivery. As an initial step, we will be piloting and inviting adults to attend some stand-alone feedback panels to gather views around specific areas of service delivery. Running alongside this, we will be inviting adults to respond to questionnaires and surveys that will allow us to gather valuable feedback and information that will feed into our decision making.

What's next?

## Children's Services

### Pod Village



We are delighted to announce that we recently secured funding to develop a new state of the art 'pod village' at our Norton site. This will involve the installation of four custom built 'pods' which will include an independent living skills kitchen and which will give us additional space on site to provide 1:1 and small group support. Work on the pods is expected to commence in the autumn and in the future we hope to secure additional funding to build toilet and shower facilities which will enable us to host overnight residential on-site.

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### New After School Clubs Offer



From September onwards we will be launching our new clubs offer which will include an increased range of options for children and young people. Based on your feedback we will be reinstating our fortnightly social and teen clubs but will also offer additional themed clubs which will be bookable online. Clubs on offer may include barn club, forest school club, cooking club or film night and bookings can be made online by visiting our website.

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### Post-16 Training Offer



Daisy Chain has expanded our license with the Autism Education Trust (AET) to include their post 16 training offer. The AET was established by the Department for Education with a mission of improving educational access, experiences and outcomes for autistic children and young people. We have held a license to deliver their early years and school years training since 2018 but as part of our commitment to increasing our transition support we recently applied for the post 16 license as well and from September will be working with local colleges and universities to ensure they are meeting the needs of their autistic students.

# Thank you!

Thank you for taking the time to read this report and we hope you now feel better informed in regards to the changes and developments Daisy Chain has been through since the start of the pandemic.

We are incredibly proud of the way in which our team has rallied together during this unprecedented time to ensure we have been able to continue to support as many of our families as possible throughout the last 18 months. That being said we think it is really important to gain your views on our response during this period as part of our ongoing reflection and to identify any opportunities for learning.

We therefore kindly request that you go to the link below and spend 5 minutes completing our COVID response survey. Please be rest assured your answers will be kept anonymous and will be used to support the development of Daisy Chain's recovery plan and contingency planning moving forward.

**Please click the link below or type into any web browser:**

***<https://forms.gle/uBMdRBFHxKUYKY7H6>***