

The Autistic Empire

Annual Report 2020

AUTISTIC?

Great.

The Autistic Empire is an autistic social organisation built by and for autistic adults to form community based on autism as a civic identity and to provide practical tools and services for all autistic people.

Table of Contents

Foreword	Pg 3
Our Values	Pg 4
Achievements	Pg 5
Events	Pg 9
Finances	Pg 13
Acknowledgements	Pg 15

Foreword

We were three months into a six month “pause” in new projects at the Autistic Empire when we heard stories of a coronavirus spreading beyond China. By the end of our “pause” in March 2020, Europe was locked down and our plans to establish our offline presence and develop support groups was defenestrated from a third floor window.



It has been a truly extraordinary year. As an organisation that operates across national boundaries, it was straight-forward to move to purely online activities, but the stress, uncertainty and social isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic has left its mark on all of our Citizens. I certainly went through a three month period where I did nothing but look at coronavirus statistics and play video games. My deepest gratitude to every Citizen who has kept us moving during this time – I have been proud of our resilience.

As we approach the first anniversary of the pandemic, it is gratifying to look back at the achievements of this annual report and see what we managed to accomplish despite such times. Despite relaxing our expectations of the year, we met our financial projections, continued to speak at a variety of events, and brought some long-standing projects to fruition. COVID-19 has got us down but not out.

We continue to build our knowledge base of what it means to be autistic, and have made several new and important findings that we have started to develop. It is my hope that we will take what we have started to discuss in our public speaking and media work and start to formalise this into training and publications for the benefit of all autistic people as we continue into our third year.

The nature of our organisation, built by and for volunteers with only limited paid support, means that we constantly need to recruit new Citizens in roles to replace those whose circumstances have changed. The pandemic has substantially impacted our ability to replace those moving on, and we will need to lay the groundwork to welcome in and support new Citizens into roles if we are to keep expanding. If you are autistic, I invite you to read our report, look at our website, and enrol as a Citizen to get involved!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah McCulloch". The signature is written in a cursive style and is contained within a white rectangular box.

Founder of the Autistic Empire

Our Values

Values are the beliefs that you hold as most important and which guide your actions. The Council conducted a year-long strategic development exercise and consultation and set the values of the Autistic Empire on October 2020.

We are autistic

Every Citizen of the Autistic Empire embraces our autistic identity. Ambivalence or negative attitudes towards an externally imposed diagnosis is still taking that journey.

We are international

We work toward the enrolment of every autistic person on the planet, and operate across borders and cultural differences, adapting to local needs.

We are united

We have a strong sense of who we are and what we are trying to do, and will not be blown off course.

We are honest

It is ok to get it wrong sometimes. We do not mind admitting this so that others can benefit from our mistakes and help each other to do better.

We are experimental

We are willing to take risks, and try new things. Something does not have to be perfect before we get it out the door.

We are accountable

We know where our power lies. We know who is responsible for what. We create structures so everyone knows where they stand.

We are empowered to make our own choices

We work towards a world where no autistic person feels like they do not understand the behaviour of other people, or feels anxious because they cannot predict how their actions will be understood by others.

We are a community

We are not a collective of individuals. We actively promote solidarity, reciprocal relationships and a sense of being part of something greater than ourselves.

Achievements

COVID-19

COVID-19 put an end to our twelve month strategy for the year and created a frightening and uncertain environment for autistic people to operate in. We therefore took a relaxed approach and asked Citizens to work on what they could. Our priority has been ensuring that the Empire remained stable throughout this period.

We have achieved that aim, releasing our long awaited alert card project (below), redeveloped and reopened our shop, contributed to the autistic pride movement and continued to raise our profile as an organisation, while ensuring that we have remained financially sustainable.

We plan to continue with this relaxed approach until the pandemic is under control and we can return to our previous level of activity.

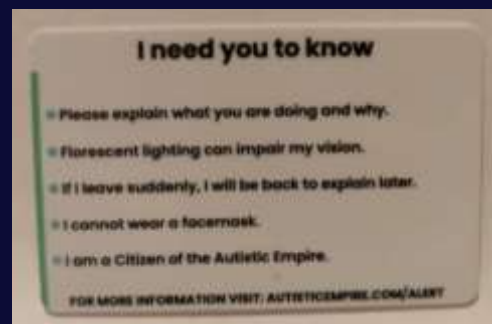
Alert Cards



Alert cards are credit-card sized cards intended to allow the holder to notify others of a medical condition or other important information in an emergency – such as the need for insulin, or a medical condition that prevents effective communication.

Alert cards have existed for autistic people for decades, but have a fixed text which often do not reflect the diversity of the way autistic people live and behave. We were inspired to create our own alert cards after one of our people had an incident at an airport, and was unable to communicate their needs in a very specific and distressing situation. Afterwards, we realised that none of the existing autism alert cards would have helped.

In July 2020, we launched the first fully customisable alert card, with a range of pre-set options to assist people to choose what they need to convey. Feedback has been universally positive, and the cards are now the most popular item in sale in our shop. In January 2021, we added new pre-set options for people who are unable to wear masks.



Autism alert cards are credit card-sized cards useful for alerting people that the cardholder is autistic. They can be used to communicate needs in situations where the cardholder is unable to communicate them directly.

Many organisations produce autism alert cards, but we've found them to be too limited. They come with one standard text about autism and autistic people, which is better than nothing but still limiting and one-size-fits-all.

To solve this problem, the Autistic Empire has designed a new, fully customisable alert card. These are made of PVC plastic and can be printed on one or both sides.



The cards also have different templates, allowing you to optionally include things like emergency contact details. Or if you're just looking for empowerment/validation, you can leave out the communication options entirely and just have a card that says you're autistic and proud of it.

Cards are £5 each, with free first class shipping to UK addresses.

MASK EXEMPT OPTIONS NOW AVAILABLE

Cards are sold individually from our website: <https://www.autisticempire.com/cards>
Wholesale services available, for more information: email sales@autisticempire.com

The Autistic Empire is an autistic social organisation built by and for autistic adults to form community based on autism as a civic identity and to provide practical tools and services for all autistic people.



We have a full card designer where you can choose from 35 pre-set options across many different categories – behaviour, processing speeds, sensory needs, environment, communication, and meltdowns. You can edit all of these options, or even add your own custom texts.

Our cards allow people to communicate exactly what they need others to know.



Autistic Pride Flag



Autistic Pride was instituted in 2005 and has become a global phenomenon celebrated by autistic communities around the world. A variety of symbols and self-designed flags have proliferated but these are often home-made or copyrighted.

In 2020, we had a pride flag professionally designed and released this under a copyleft licence for use by all autistic

people as they see fit to express pride in their identity.

We are now producing pride flags and accompanying merchandise in time for Autistic Pride Day on June 8th, 2021.

Audible Autism

We have now released over **27** episodes of Audible Autism, and achieved over **5,000** downloads.

The production team now consists of three people, who are committed to producing at least seven episodes annually.

We also transferred platform to Anchor and now have feeds on all major podcast providers, including Spotify. If you can listen to podcasts on it, you will find Audible Autism there.



This year, Season 3, we have released episodes on:

- Black History Month
- Autistic Parenting
- Being an autistic psychologist
- Theme parks

We have really prioritised the production process in the last few years and now we have a substantial body of work, will be looking to promote our podcast in the coming year. Expect us!

Check out our archive at <http://www.audibleautism.com>

AutisticEmpire.com

Our web traffic tripled this year, and the Autistic Empire website now averages 1200 visitors a month, with spikes when we have made significant announcements or received promotion via external media.

We have updated and expanded most of our external content, and added further content to our Vault (especially related to COVID-19).

Our goal as an organisation is to provide tools and services that serve the entire autistic community, although access to certain resources, such as our Vault and 42 Q+A database, continues to be available to Citizens only.



Social media

Our social media has continued to grow, usually in response to an event we have attended. We spent the majority of this year without a communications officer, which limited our social media presence. We hired a freelancer on contract in September 2020 to do some promotional work around the release of the alert cards, which saw a positive uptick. We are looking to rejig our communications strategy this year so it is consistent and sustainable.

All social media is organic, no advertising or third party promotion.



2400 followers on Facebook



890 followers on Instagram



230 followers on Twitter

Events

COVID-19 put moved most of our events online this year, but we still managed a number of public appearances, including internationally.

Living in a Neurotypical World



Limmud Festival is an annual five day conference for Jewish learning held in Birmingham, UK. In December 2019, Sarah presented two sessions, one for autistic people, and one for neurotypical people. The late night session for autistic people was enthusiastically attended and overran the given time by two hours!

The morning session, “Living in a Neurotypical World”, was attended by a mixture of autistic people and jewish professionals and educators. Sarah spoke about our work for the Empire and gave a range of observations from her personal and professional life of the differences between neurotypical and autistic lifestyles.

Autistic Pride Online Celebration

Autistic Pride is a worldwide autistic-led celebration of ourselves as autistic people, which runs on June 18th every year as part of Pride Month. Due to COVID-19, activists from around the world organised a single twelve hour long event across time zones and continents, which was a great success and remarkable achievement.



Sarah spoke on behalf of the Autistic Empire in the London Autistic Pride slot, and spoke on the work of the Autistic Empire to develop an autistic civic identity. In solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests, Sarah also spoke about the barriers we had experienced bringing in Citizens from minority community and the importance of ensuring that the autistic community includes all autistic people from every background and culture.

Black Lives Matter

On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by police officers in Minnesota, United States. His death sparked demonstrations around the world, protesting against police brutality and institutional racism against black people. Virtually every organisation and community was faced a reckoning with their own structural hierarchies and racisms, and this has had a significant impact on the world that is still unfolding today.

The Autistic Empire was conceived and founded by a diverse group of autistic adults with a range of backgrounds, and has always sought to create an inclusive community for every autistic person. We have found a number of barriers to inclusion working with both autistic and non-autistic groups, and we have struggled to pull off plans for black Autistic Citizens due to a lack of understanding and support.

In June 2020, the Council [published a statement](#) explaining our support for the Black Lives Matter movement and the struggle it sought to highlight, and outlined some of the ways in which we have tried to be inclusive and the barriers we have faced to doing so. Nonetheless, this continues to be a real area of development and we are continuing to ask ourselves how we can progress this issue on behalf of our Citizenry.

BLACK LIVES MATTER

There was also some backlash to the BLM movement, and we noticed that in many autistic groups, there were a number of autistic people who had misunderstood the social context of Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter and said things that have received angry, hurt responses which they found confusing.

The Autistic Empire therefore republished a Medium post, [All Lives Matter?](#), in full across all of our social media to provide some context. All Lives Matter? tries to explain the social context with step-by-step explanations, multiple analogies, statistics, and cartoons.



October is Black History Month in the United States and to mark it, we released a special episode of Audible Autism with a panel of black autistic activists, discussing the difficulties they faced within the black and autistic communities. We do not have the resources to provide transcripts of every Audible Autism episode (yet), but given its importance, commissioned and released [a transcript](#) so the content could be accessible to as many people as possible.

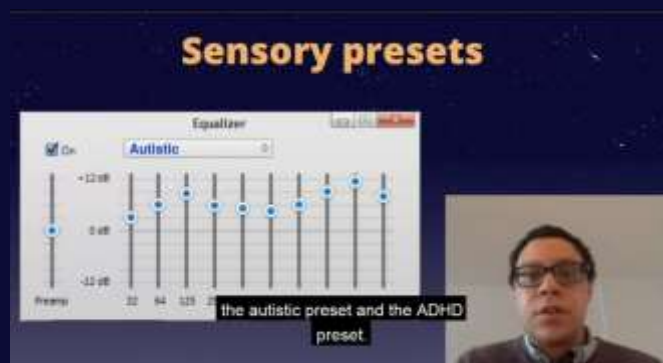
Sensory Processing in Autism Online Summit



One of the research strands of the Autistic Empire is to developing a new model of autism that focusses on autistic-centred experience rather than identifying impairments in comparison to the neurotypical norm. In 2019, we released the findings of our Grand Sensory Survey that looked at the reported sensory experiences

of autistic people and found several significant commonalities that had not been previously identified by autism research. We have since then been working with the Star SPD Institute in the United States to build on our informal research with a formal study to produce methodologically rigorous data suitable for publication.

As part of this, we were invited to present a seminar to the Sensory Processing in Autism Online Summit hosted by Star SPD in July 2020. Alex, our Research Lead, gave an overview of our findings, with updates on several areas we have learned since the time of the survey. He also presented some preliminary ideas we have had viewing autism and other neurodiversities such as ADHD as a “sensory preset”, using the analogy of a music equaliser.



Sarah gave an overview of her sensory experiences of an autistic person and the value of finding a new model, and Alex and Sarah took questions from an audience of 60.



A recording of the seminar has now been made available as Continuing Professional Development on the Star SPD online education platform, ensuring our work will continue to be viewed and absorbed by health and education professionals across the United States.

Our research into sensory experiences and associated areas such memory and visualisation has significant implications for therapy and professional practice as well as autistic self-understanding, and continues to be among our most promising areas of work.

Autism and Other Neurological Minorities

The Autistic Empire is not an autistic advocacy group. We do not liaise between the neurotypical world and our own to try to change public policy or non-autistic attitudes - we are trying to build an internal focussed community that identifies and solves the problems of our people. However, from our experience, it is our belief that many autistic adults, perhaps the majority, do not know that they are autistic. It is very difficult to build a community where substantial parts of the populations are unaware they belong to it.



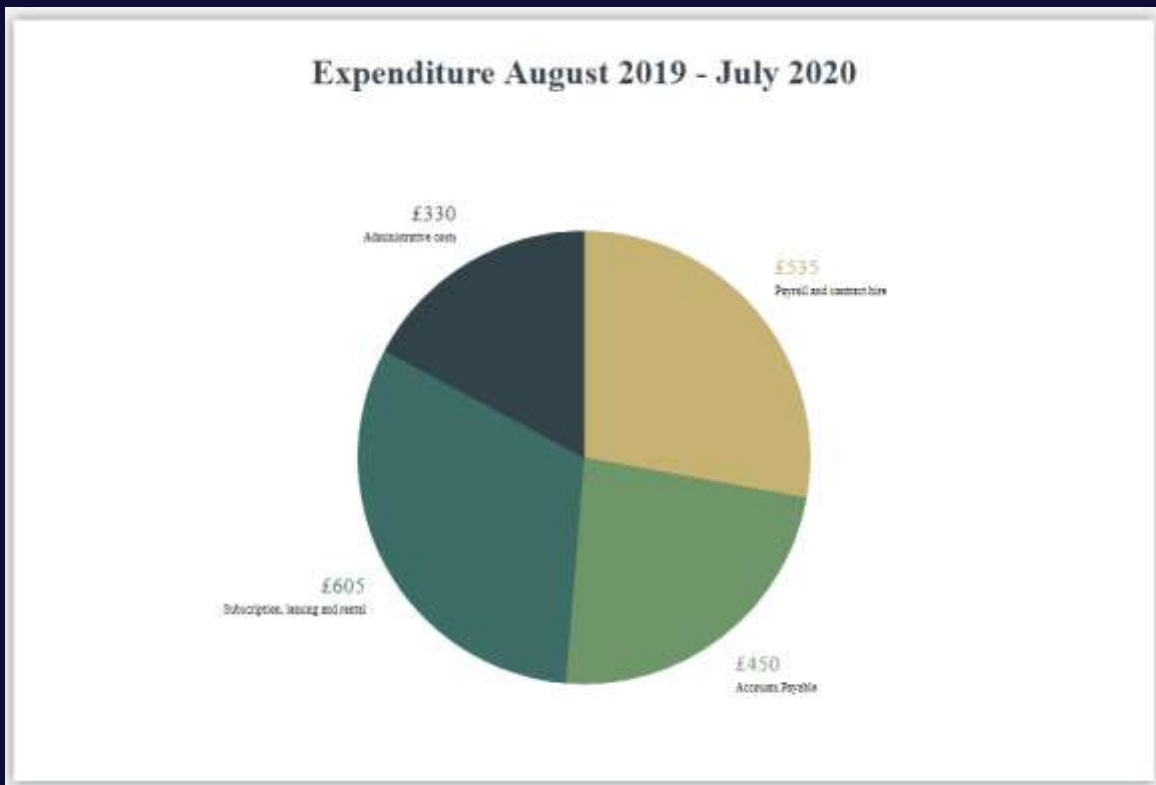
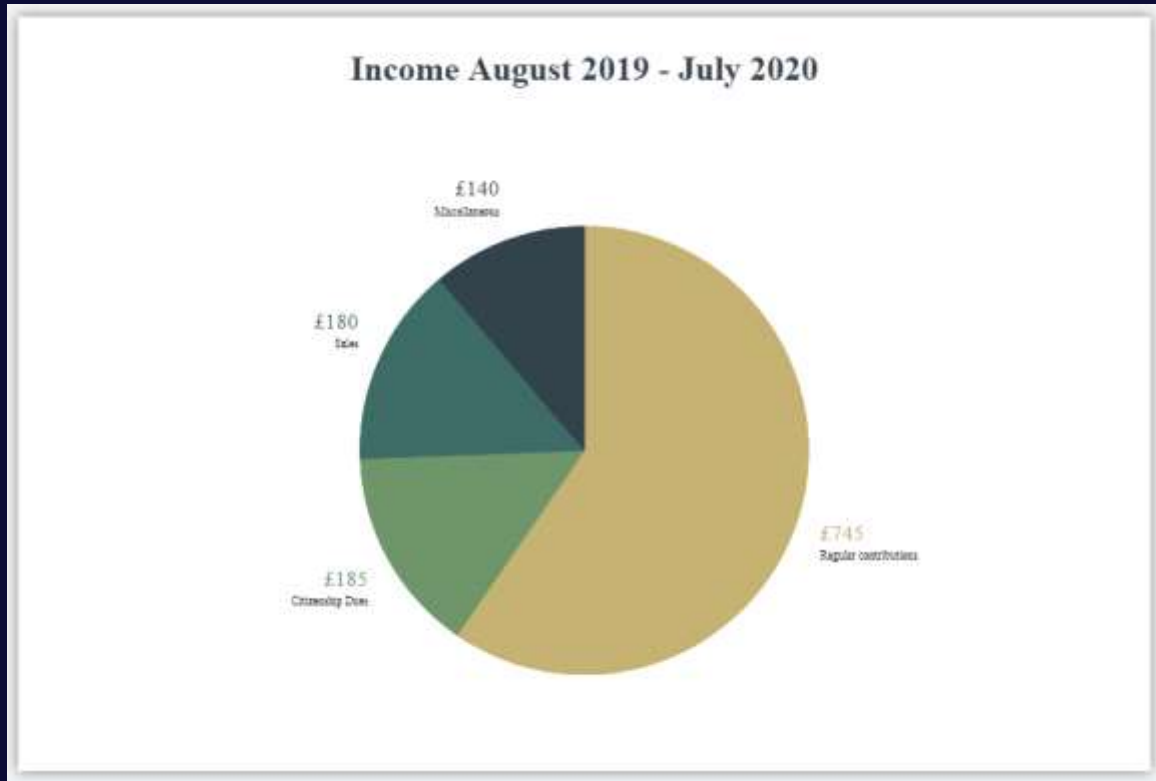
We therefore provide speakers for non-autistic groups to raise awareness of our work and encourage autistic adults who may be in the audience, or who may be friends or family of neurotypical audience members, to understand and accept their identity on their journey to self-actualisation. In July 2020, Sarah participated in an "In Conversation" salon session with the Rabbi of New London Synagogue about her personal and professional observations as an autistic adult, and took questions from the audience. She was contacted afterwards by several audience members who had realised that they were autistic. This has subsequently had a significant impact on their lives and changed the way they approach relationships and their sensory needs.

Life as a minority in a neurotypical world can be hard, but it is harder when you do not even know why you are different. It is moments such as these that give people the realisation they need to begin to understand who they are and what they need to do to lead happy and meaningful lives. But the information available following that realisation is variable in quality and often accessible only to professionals. We have to do more.

The Autistic Empire is an autistic social organisation built by and for autistic adults to form community based on autism as a civic identity and to provide practical tools and services for all autistic people. We don't need a diagnosis. We need you.

Finances

All figures are rounded to the nearest five and may not reconcile to in these charts.



Explanatory key:

Regular contributions: Monthly direct debits.

Citizenship fees: Recurring annual fees for Citizenship of the Autistic Empire (currently £9 a year)

Sales: Our shop currently offers alert cards, some products by autistic artists, and tech such as weighted blankets.

Misc.: Miscellaneous revenue.

Payroll and contract hire: Website development, graphic design, shop management, communications work.

Subscriptions, leasing and rental: Subscriptions to our social media management software, G-Suite applications, website hosting, etc.

Administrative costs: Printing, business insurance, company registration, office supplies, bank charges, expenses for volunteers at events.

After tumultuous and wild accounting in our start-up year, the Autistic Empire now has regular, well-kept accounts and an annual budget, which Companies House have accepted.

In the 2019-2020 accounting period, we hired staff to assist with the shop, our social media, and freelancers to do limited graphic design and transcription work. We currently have no employed staff, but continue to recognise the need and will be trying to redevelop the role descriptions and recruit to these in 2021.

Our Citizens nearly all renewed after the first proper year of paid membership, but revenue from our shop fell after we closed it for the majority of the accounting period. The shop has now reopened and we have paid off some accumulated debt. We are now working on providing automatic listings on eBay and Amazon to make our platform a compelling choice for autistic artists and producers.

Overall, the Autistic Empire continue to draw on the regular contributions of specific individuals for support, and has a relatively low turnover in comparison to our stated ambitions. However, our income and expenditure is now sustainable for the next five years and we are developing the initial stages of new revenue generating-services which will take the Autistic Empire to the next level.

We now aspire to be in a situation where we will soon have to pay tax.

Acknowledgements

The Autistic Empire is intended to be a long-term project unreliant on any one person. We are a community of autistic adults united around a common vision, and have sought to develop our networks with patience and a professional attitude.

We'd like to thank everyone who given us time, advice, financial support, and access to their own contacts and organisations. We would not, and will not, be here without you.



Imperial Trading & Services
Company No. 11019483

Kemp House
152-160 City Road
London,
EC1V 2NX