

People who use AAC at the CM conference

Users of AAC have always attended the CM conference, but as attendance by people using AAC started to increase, questions were raised as to whether the conference offered enough that was of direct interest to users of AAC.

There was then some discussion as to whether the conference was for professionals or everyone with an interest in AAC. The vast majority of members expressed the view that the conference was for everyone interested in AAC. Communication Matters subsidises a limited number of places for users of AAC and their families/ carers recognising that many people who use AAC are on very low incomes so cannot afford to attend (and also pay for their support workers to attend). Each year these subsidised places are oversubscribed.

ISAAC biennial conferences have held a 'town meeting' for AAC users at which any AAC user may say whatever they wish, while non-AAC users may attend but are not allowed to speak. This approach highlighted some issues. Many users are used to being the only AAC user in their community. Initially, these meetings were chaotic since once the opening comments were made all the users of AAC put their heads down and started to compose what they wanted to say and then pressed their 'Speak' button without consideration for whoever else was speaking. This led to quite a bit of rethinking on the part of the non-AAC users present, as well as being a learning process for users of AAC. Communication Matters tried this format for two years, but attendees found it was not the best forum for everyone to have a say or share their views and opinions.

CM initiated a programme of activities for users of AAC. These were optional - nobody was required to attend them or was barred from attending other presentations. Over the years, the nature of these activities has changed from structured sessions, usually led by professionals, to workshops and presentations led by those who use AAC. Often one of the main plenary speakers each year is someone who uses AAC. The general conference programme also provides a platform for users to submit and present papers, often around personal experiences. It is good to know that the conference is about people as well as about systems, processes and working procedures.

Each person who uses AAC is unique. They and their families/carers are 'experts' in their communication methods. At the conference, their interests are not solely to listen to others who use AAC; they also wish to attend sessions that will increase their overall knowledge of AAC, and help with developing life skills at all ages, from developing literacy to understanding assessment processes, and hearing about how professionals have supported transitions. They are interested in research, and want to hear how it might help them, and they often become active participants in studies.

"People who use AAC get from the conferences the same experiences as the other attendees. Attending sessions is a big part of the conference for everyone, but there is also the opportunity to network with people who understand their needs, to visit the exhibition and try out new equipment, to catch up with old friends and make new friends. The conference can be like coming home to a large family gathering, where everyone is pleased to see you again, respects the communication needs of others, shows patience and is willing to listen." (Beth Moulam)

