

# GRASP

## Responses to the Pandemic Lock-down

This note records the responses across Quakers in Yorkshire to the pandemic lock-down. The following minute of a meeting of GRASP on 24 August 2020 collates the responses. This is followed by reports from each of the Area Meeting representatives.

### Minute 2. Responses to the pandemic lockdown

We have received reports from area meeting representatives of how each AM has responded to the pandemic lockdown.

There has been a wide range of responses, driven by the strong desire to enable worshipping communities to continue to worship.

Most Local Meetings have used virtual meetings for worship, generally with the zoom platform. The rate of uptake has depended on the level of technical experience available. The near ubiquitous availability of smartphones, tablets and laptops has made it easier to arrange zoom meeting for worship and now, for some meetings, blended worship.

The advantage of virtual meetings for worship include: enabling geographically dispersed participation; multiple meetings in the week; and enabling participation by those who are unable to come to a physical meeting.

Virtual meetings have been used for many other purposes, such as poetry groups, all with the aim of cementing the community together. Children's meetings have been run virtually in some meetings. Virtual meetings have been particularly successful with young people and attendance has gone up.

Meetings have started to grapple with how to continue Quaker witness which necessarily has taken a back-seat during the lock-down. Looking ahead there are issues as to how to do outreach and how to maintain Quaker networking. Zoom meetings are not being widely advertised and this may make it more difficult for new enquirers to find us.

Virtual business meetings have been successful, helped by the circulation of draft minutes. Some local meetings have held more, shorter, business meetings. Area Meetings have met using zoom.

Clerks have found virtual meetings to be challenging. Sensing the wishes of the meeting is more difficult. So discernment is different and there is a danger that the Quaker business method is diluted. Controversial issues seem to have been avoided by clerks.

Ways of using virtual meetings so as to maintain and enhance the Quaker business method could be a topic for GRASP to discuss more widely. York AM has used worship sharing as a way of dealing with the issue of the title "overseer".

Re-opening of meeting houses is happening slowly. The local meeting needs to be confident that it can be done properly and sensitively to the needs of Friends who must self-isolate. Trustees need to be assured that all regulations and local health and safety measures are in place. The large number of old premises makes social distancing a real challenge.

A digital divide has emerged between Friends who are confident with new technology and Friends who do not have access to technology, or do not wish to use new technology. This has created a new diversity among Friends. Meetings are dealing with this diversity sensitively and are aware of the importance of maintaining and enhancing inclusive Quaker communities.

## Pickering & Hall AM

I contacted key Friends in PHAM to ask about initiatives that their meetings have successfully tried to adopt in light of changes due to the pandemic. In summary we have:

- AM-wide Sunday and Wednesday meetings for worship, or joining other similar meetings (eg Woodbrooke, or another meeting elsewhere)
- Area and Local (some) Meetings for Church Affairs by Zoom
- Area and Local Committee meetings by Zoom
- Socially distanced committee meetings in the meeting house garden or a Friend's garden
- Blended meetings (of any kind) being considered in two LMs for the future, but not yet definite
- Email: poetry group and including email group for church affairs as above
- Telephone trees or regular calls
- On-line courses eg Woodbrooke (Poetry for the Soul was mentioned in particular) or QPSW webinars
- Discovery of existing on-line resources not previously known

Full risk assessments for a return to meeting houses have been carried out and all PHAM meetings except Whitby (which meets in a community centre) are now meeting again with various restrictions and precautions. The weekly Zoom meetings are continuing for a small group of Friends who are not able to attend or comfortable with meeting in person yet. This may be due to ongoing shielding, or because the new arrangements simply mitigate against a sense of being gathered for those individuals. At its height the Zoom Sunday worship had up to 40 people attending; this is now down to about 8-10 and we expect to continue to offer it for the next few weeks at least.

- Reflections on the use of Zoom
  - It is easier for people to hear what is said by Zoom than in a large room (even with a loop system) but harder to manage discussion in a large group
  - Not all Friends are willing or able (for a variety of reasons – technical and personal) to engage with technology
  - We recognise the “green” credentials of reduced travel and reduced stress for Friends driving long distances – in future this may help in poor weather or on dark winter evenings, or just if someone is a little under the weather but feels able to be in the meeting
  - Also “a delight to 'attend' meetings in my slippers”
  - At least one LM has been circulating draft minutes of record to keep a record what has happened in the meeting and these are approved by email; no key decisions have been taken during this time although committees have continued to work to ensure necessities are covered.

Our Trustees would be very interested to explore what might be possible through sharing ideas with other AMs and, perhaps, to think through what might be possible through collaboration over the range of AM and Trustee issues.

## **How has Sheffield and Balby Area Meeting responded since March to the simplification initiative, and the pandemic?**

The response of our Area Meeting to the two changes identified in the title has been, in my eyes, relatively effective and inclusive. Lockdown prompted a rapid and wholesale shift to Zoom for Meetings for Worship, committee work, and all manner of other Quaker activity, and this occurred quickly and relatively smoothly. Elders took care to include as many members and attenders as possible within this switch, with a list of more technologically-confident f/Friends being assembled to support those who were less sure of the changes. This meant that by the second Sunday after lockdown, we were pretty confident that anyone who wasn't taking part in the Zoom meetings was doing so out of choice rather than technological barriers. To facilitate use of Zoom, one of our four Local Meetings and the Area Meeting itself, purchased Pro Zoom accounts for the use of groups and individuals; this has been very helpful, although it is likely that we will reduce to one account early in 2021. To retain a sense of community, we have "News of friends" at the end of Meetings for Worship, and different LMs have found various ways to imitate the softer edges of meeting, with opportunities for socialising and informal conversations.

The lockdown has also brought an opportunity to try new things, which I'm not sure we would have ventured had it not been necessary; we now have a Thursday evening "Epilogue" Meeting for Worship, emerging from one LM but open to the whole AM. This has proved a consistently popular space, and one we hope will continue even as meeting houses re-open. Another LM with a concern for sustainability has taken many of its meetings and working groups online, therefore, by happy accident, opening them up to participation by members of other LMs. We have been creative in our changes to business meetings, with one LM moving these to Saturdays now there is no benefit in them following directly from the main Meeting for Worship; and despite a bumpy start we have now held two AMs with a measure of success. Again it has led us to do things in different ways, including circulating draft minutes prior to the meeting so that everyone participating has the clearest idea possible of what is known about each item and what might need to be discerned; again, we hope that this will continue even as our regular business practices re-emerge.

The move online within the Quaker setting has, as in many other fields, led to an emphasis on simplification that chimes well with the work of GRASP. Less time is spent in committee meetings, and more is discussed and arranged electronically. As noted in relation to Area Meeting we are trying to simplify how business happens, with an intention to make it more accessible and attractive to a wider range of members and attenders. The youth worker shared between our AM and Yorkshire has had greater engagement from the young people online than they ever managed face-to-face, despite sterling efforts - there is a greater sense of connectivity between young people in geographical areas that helps strengthen their Quaker identity. As Trustees start to consider re-opening meeting houses and re-starting commercial operations, they too are drawing on information and guidance from a wider geographical range of meetings, and this perhaps reinforces the argument outlined by GRASP of pooling expertise in areas such as Trustees and Treasurers, not least to alleviate demands on individuals within meetings.

In practical terms, the interim GRASP report was considered by the meeting in January, and put out to individuals for their feedback soon after. My sense is the meeting is comfortable with this level of input at present, and will be happy to consider the final report, at LM and/or AM level, in due course.

## **York AM**

Realising that I didn't have an overview of the situation in all the LMs in York AM, I sent a series of questions to the clerks of each LM. All responded and several said that it had been a useful exercise for their own meeting.

### **Have you held virtual Meetings for worship? How successful do you think they have been? Has attendance gone up or down?**

All five LMs have held Zoom Meetings for Worship, and all reported that they have been successful. Attendance has varied, with some reporting initially higher than before lockdown, others lower, with a trend towards getting lower with time and generally now lower than before. On the other hand, there has been some attendance from Friends who had previously not attended, including those from far away. The absence of Friends from Zoom meetings is highlighted, with some unable to access because of lack of suitable tech, and others choosing not to attend even though they could.

Two LMs have held 45 minute meetings rather than a whole hour.

### **Have you held virtual business meetings, and how successful or difficult have they been?**

All have held virtual business meetings, with a good degree of success. The need to have someone to help the clerk identify those who wish to speak was highlighted. There was also a need for increased preparation, with agendas and papers sent out in advance (including to those unable to attend a zoom meeting). Attendance at business meetings has been higher than before in most LMs, perhaps because there is no pressure to travel back home.

### **What concerns do you have about the way you have had to operate?**

The exclusion of some Friends and the resultant split between those who have taken virtual meetings on board and those who have not, either through choice or necessity, is the main concern. One LM was concerned about the separation of children's meeting, though they are now joining for the last 10 minutes (as they had previously).

### **How have you kept in touch with those who haven't been able or willing to join virtual meetings?**

All meetings reported that contact has been maintained by phone, email and in some cases visits (with suitable distancing). There have been a few out-door Meetings for Worship. I get the impression that there have been very active efforts to maintain contact, in order to overcome the concerns outlined above.

### **Have you held any other virtual meetings (discussion/interest groups etc)?**

Worship sharing, premises, poetry, discussion, pastoral care, children's, young people, attenders, craft, book club, coffee mornings – all have been held in various LMs. There have also been various other committee meetings held at most LMs, and occasional slight technical difficulties aside have worked well. Some comments suggest that they are deemed more efficient by zoom than in person.

### **Do you envisage keeping any of the changes you have made into the future?**

Several LMs say that they envisage continuing to hold committee meetings by zoom in the future, though others are undecided. As far as Meetings for Worship is concerned, much depends on the success of 'blended' meetings. One LM has already tried blended MfWs, and after some improvements to the technology and a lot of careful planning is continuing with this. They don't yet know if they will continue into the future – numbers actually attending in person remain low.

### **What has been lost or gained?**

Losses include holding full Meetings for Worship, the absence of overseers who do not have the technology, the ability to have a quiet chat face to face with someone, the inclusivity of all ages together. A sense of separation between those with access to zoom and those who don't.

Gains include familiarity with new technology, a wider sense of community from helping others (shopping, delivering prescriptions etc), break-out groups or chat rooms (not all LMs have had these), more efficient committee meetings.

Only one LM has so far held blended MfWs, though others may follow. One LM doesn't have access to technology within the Meeting House so this would not be possible. Outdoor MfWs are being tried. I sense a high degree of variability in engagement with new ways of working, both between Meetings and between individuals. Many people find zoom very tiring, which limits the time they are willing to stay in a meeting of whatever sort. Area Meeting and some other Area level meetings have been held successfully, though again there needs to be careful organisation and curation to avoid burnout.

## **Leeds AM**

There have been 2 Area Meetings online with good attendance. GRASP will be discussed again at the Area Meeting on 8 September.

**Carlton Hill** held Zoom MfW on Sunday mornings and Thursday evenings. The Sunday morning MfW is now blended with up to 14 people able to attend in the meeting house. Friends who did not use computers were supported to use their phones and Young Friends provided computer support to several people. We have regular attenders from Portugal, Spain and the Philippines and quite a few Friends who have moved elsewhere in the UK have had the opportunity to attend. Leeds University Chaplaincy held online Breathe (Quaker-style worship) every Tuesday and Thursday.

Other activities: virtual coffee mornings, Bible study, Ancient Greek philosophy, looking at Advices & Queries and Poetry.

MfW for Business has been held online with better attendance than normal. Elders & Overseers and most committees have met online. The Outreach committee plans to continue having most of its meetings on Zoom to allow participation of people from other Leeds meetings as it has responsibility for outreach for the whole of Leeds AM.

**Rawdon** were holding BMs by Zoom but not MfW. They commenced F2F MfW earlier this month. They had a telephone tree support system alongside of a weekly newsletter which was emailed out by their Clerk.

**Ilkley** held weekly Zoom MfW and also a regular discussion group online which is continuing. F2F MfW started 2 weeks ago and there is a hope to try a blended F2F and online MfW for the first time this Sunday. Elders & Overseers meetings have been held online as have business meetings. We have also been operating a group-based support system from the outset of lockdown. Garden gatherings for 6 people have also been held.

**Roundhay** have held weekly Zoom MfW and have certainly had at least one BM held online. Not sure about other activities.

**Gildersome** Friends have been supporting each other through a weekly telephone system and a newsletter which is largely posted out to Friends.

One challenge has been how to continue outreach. There is a recognition that we need to use Facebook and social media more and get involved in online activities but we lack capacity and/or people motivated to do this work.

## Craven & Keighley AM

The AM is characterised by an aged demographic with very few young families and children. The area has been popular for retired Friends who have moved from elsewhere in the country. This has meant that there are plenty of older active Friends but their Quaker service takes place in many parts of the yearly meeting or with Quaker Recognised Groups. This wider service competes with the needs of the local meetings and area meeting.

There are five local meetings, three of medium size and two small meetings. All meetings have Meeting Houses, four of which are listed and two of these listed II\*. This means that premises maintenance takes up a significant resource – both human and financial. A consequence is that the life of the AM is just the collection of the sum of the life of each of the local meetings. The area meetings as such has historically done very little. This is now changing, mainly because the AM became a registered charity last year and the AM trustees have of necessity taken on responsibilities traditionally done in the local meetings. This includes supporting the small meetings and their premises.

Consideration of the simplification and reinvigoration agenda has been slow to take off and so far and has mainly been in one of the local meetings. It was due to be considered at the AM in May 2020 but this was postponed until the autumn. The AM has met twice by zoom with an agenda of essential business. Both meetings were well attended and the business was conducted quickly, partly due to the preparation and dissemination of detailed draft minutes.

The pandemic lock-down forced meetings to close and find new ways of continuing to be cohesive communities. In the early stages of the lock-down the form depended on the skills available with individual Friends. Some meetings immediately used Zoom; others found that worshipping At Home without technology kept Friends together. Meetings have tried various forms of virtual worship at different times of the week. One meeting held a period of silent worship on Facebook. As the restrictions eased, some meetings moved to worshipping in the garden of the meeting house - and continue to do so. One meeting has reopened for Sunday worship (but not for lettings). Getting agreement to reopen was quite time-consuming but ultimately well worthwhile. Social distancing limits the number in the meeting room but so far this has not proved a problem. The use of face-masks indoors had already been decided before the government made it mandatory. Some Friends said they were happy to continue to worship remotely and this led to trials of Blended Worship using a laptop and external microphone. The blended worship on a Sunday morning has been successful, appreciated by both those present and those worshipping remotely and technically easy to manage.

The lock-down has highlighted the importance of enabling those without technology to be able to continue to worship together. This technical divide splits meetings but can be overcome with care and attention. It has highlighted a new aspect to diversity, where Overseers can play a valuable role in making sure that meetings remain inclusive communities.

The energy of Friends has been taken up with trying to maintain the worshipping community and this has left little time for thinking about the future. So outreach, simplification and the need for reinvigoration could be an interesting challenge.

## **Brighthouse West Yorkshire Area Meeting**

**1. Responses to the Pandemic** – our experiences are best summarised in the minute from our most recent (zoom) Area Meeting.

**Minute from BWYAM (via Zoom) on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2020**  
**26/07/08 Sharing our experiences.**

*These are unusual and challenging times. The risk from Covid 19 and the measures that have been taken to restrict physical contact and gatherings have impacted us all. We are aware that Calderdale, Kirklees and Bradford are all or have been 'Areas of concern.' This is a situation which will be with us for some time and to which we, like other organisations and faith communities, need to adapt. Friend's House has sent out quite detailed guidelines for meetings in person, which can seem quite daunting.*

*We spent time hearing about how each meeting has managed during lockdown and ways to support each other. We discussed what has been the progress and thoughts on meeting in person or blended meetings.*

*In **Huddersfield** clerks, elders and 'overseers' have been meeting regularly to discuss the options but have no immediate plans for meeting in person and not before 1<sup>st</sup> September. They plan to meet outside in the garden on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, with people bringing their own chairs, however the meeting house will remain closed and the zoom meeting will also go ahead. There is a digital divide in who can join meetings virtually but a circle of friendship group to encourage connections between those who can and can't use digital technology has been established. What'sapp groups are useful but do require people to have a smart phone which cuts some people out. A group supporting asylum seekers (DASH) are renting a room in the meeting house, and they have responsibility for ensuring health and safety for that room.*

***Halifax** has not been holding meeting for worship on zoom but people are worshipping in their own homes. There is interest in worshipping together again in person and an informal meeting in a private garden has taken place. A risk assessment will be needed before meeting in the meeting house and initial steps have been taken, with a first and second draft of the risk assessment prepared. As the meeting uses rented premises it has to be sent to the landlord and is helpful if it is sent to Deryck Hillas. The maximum likely to be accommodated in the new circumstances is 12-14. It seems likely that some people when they become aware of constraints involved in meeting in person again may be put off from attending.*

***Bradford** will undertake the risk assessment process in August for possible use of the building from September onwards, with no access to the building permitted at present. A decision on use will be made after this is done. All members are now on e-mail and people did respond positively to requests for feedback on a decision. Some are experiencing a lack of contact and or are cautious about using public transport to return to a meeting in person.*

***Scholes** is struggling. Three of those most involved in the meeting have no internet access and that is a large proportion in a small meeting. There is a lot of use of the phone. It is difficult to copy everything e.g. Meeting Points, to send out by post. There is not that much communication between people. They have decided not to meet in person or open FMH yet*

*as so many people are shielding or are over 70.*

***Hebden Bridge** rent a social services day care premises for Sundays but there is no likelihood that this will be possible in the near future. Other venues are being explored but there are no current plans for in person meetings but this will be examined further in September. Clerks and elders are exploring what this means for the meeting. A shorter zoom mid-week MfW has been started on a Thursday evening, which has enabled some to join who could not join on a Sunday. There is also a Thursday morning zoom discussion group, which those joining have found very valuable.*

*We want to support each other as much as is possible. In the light of our different capacities and situations if there is anything people in other meetings need please ask and we will respond as far as people have the capacity to do so.*

## **2. Initiatives towards Simplification and Reinvigoration.**

Brighouse West Yorkshire Area Meeting has both current and past experience of struggling to fill key roles. In 2006 nominations was unable to find a replacement for a long-serving and very effective AM clerk – in that situation a team of three volunteered to step in for a year in order to allow time for a better solution to be found.

In November 2016 we were in a much worse situation as nominations couldn't find names for AM clerk, AM asst clerk, AM treasurer, clerk to trustees, safeguarding co-ordinator, membership clerk, archivist or university chaplain. In that situation we adopted an 8 point plan:

1. For 2017 we agreed to have just 4 Area Meeting sessions to be held on a Sunday after a shared lunch at the host local meeting and these will focus purely on the necessary business such as membership, nominations and appointing special meetings for worship.
2. One person agreed to clerk the first Area Meeting of 2017 and provided advice and support for the individual or team of individuals who we hoped could be identified to take over the more limited Area Meeting clerking role for the rest of 2017
3. We asked Area Meeting Trustees to adopt a temporary rota arrangement for clerking trustees meetings for the coming year, pending the appointment of a clerk to trustees. The former clerk to trustees provided interim mentoring support to our trustee group.
4. We asked AM trustees to seek interest initially from within our AM community to undertake a project (on a paid self-employed basis) to work with our local treasurers to set up a new financial system across the Area Meeting (Paxton) in order to make the roles of AM treasurer and Local Meeting Treasurer significantly more manageable
5. We identified 4 new names to join our AM nominations group on a short-term basis to assist with the current situation.
6. We asked our nominations group to draft a letter with very brief role descriptions (provided initially by current postholders) for the key roles identified above and circulated this around AM asking for suggestions for nominations to be made to them at the earliest opportunity.

7. Given the urgency of the situation we agreed that we would use our between meetings process to make appointments where this is necessary
8. In addition to the above we proposed an event to be organised before July 2017 to 'kindle the embers' of our AM in which we engaged the whole Area Meeting in considering developmental options.

The result of the above plan was that names were found for the key roles during 2017 and the situation improved considerably, with AM being generally well attended since that time. Since 2017 we have also done further work on centralising our treasuring and accounting functions and to facilitate we moved from Paxton to the Liberty online system. This has proved very successful and we are looking to further simplify the role of LM treasurer by making greater use of our paid AM bookkeeper and inviting LM treasurers to send financial documentation (e.g. bank statements and receipts) to be entered on the system centrally.

However, we are now again in the situation where nominations is unable to find a name for AM clerk or AM assistant clerk for next year. Finding a solution to this has become a priority in our local GRASP agenda and we are currently looking at options to address this.

## Central Yorkshire AM

More Friends have been involved through virtual meetings because of distance or the timing of Sunday Meeting for Worship. Others in CYAM have been keen to join when home LM does not offer a virtual meeting

Mid-week meetings have meant more people being involved who might otherwise miss on Sunday mornings.

At least one LM has declined to use virtual technology through principle or unease with technology.

Since easing of lockdown there have been some successful attempts at a blended meeting, even if an investment in better WIFI is necessary.

The telephone tree has helped maintain contact with those vulnerable to isolation

An LM is developing an online Children's' Meeting based on online Friends House resource

Contact is being made with possible lets, for thoughts and intentions, as part of the process of re-opening meeting houses and risk assessments have been developed and shared with other LMs

Some Meetings for Worship for business and an AM have been held reasonably successfully, at least for those able to join. The AM had a 'non-controversial' agenda and meant more preparation, eg documents in advance, a good thing. There were no difficult minutes but a concern was raised how the Clerk and Assistant Clerk might work at such moments to prepare minutes. Online meetings might also prevent heated moments arising.

Are there dangers of compromising the Quaker business method, either by too much minute preparation or difficulty in arriving at appropriate minutes?