

Simpler meetings – area meetings

Introduction

This document is about possibilities. It shares many ideas collected from Quakers around Britain about how we can simplify the way we organise ourselves. You can find more topics here: www.quaker.org.uk/simplermeetings. For each topic there is a document and a short video. All the topics are collected in “*Simpler Meetings – what is possible*”, which also explains ways you can approach the topics.

Where could we start?

You could consider four questions. The first is really important to discuss:

- What is the area meeting for?

Someone asked this useful question in a session recently:

- How can we make area meeting an occasion that people actually *want* to come to?!

The next question is even more challenging:

- How much is it the discernment of the whole area meeting, if the only people who can attend are those who can spare six hours on a Sunday (including travel time) or nine hours on a Saturday (including travel), eight or nine times a year?

A fourth question broadens that:

- Is it inclusive?

So, how can we combine worship and community, concerns and appointments, decisions and learning? (And of course food!)

Frequency

Quite a few area meetings are reducing the frequency from the more traditional pattern of nine or ten times a year, to five or six times in a year. Some of these have a significant element of community building or learning. Some are having five area meetings for business and two for learning. There is one that has recently decided to experiment with three times in the year for a whole day of the more meaty, business style approach and three focused on learning and community building. They will have a bit of urgent business at the end if they have to. Of course there are pros and cons to this kind of change, definitely worth considering.

Combinations

Some area meetings aim to cover all elements together. For example, they meet for worship, then have a speaker, and then lunch and a social time, and then an activity

or workshop, and then some business. They are putting all those aspects together in a rounded package.

Being inclusive

Setting out to be inclusive may mean re-considering the location, time of day and the day of the week. Some areas move the day around so it not always the same every meeting. Provision for children can be important in enabling participation. We are an all age community, and we are not just thinking about children. What are the needs and circumstances of young adults, middle-aged adults, people who are working or have family commitments, as well as older adults?

Travel

Several areas have recently decided to hold most of their area meetings at a central transport hub, so most people can reach it in a reasonable amount of time. This has replaced focusing on rotating between every single meeting in the area - there is no rule saying you must do that. Sharing out the delight of hosting area meeting may not be easy for small meetings. Public transport is important – though do check whether people are actually using public transport before ruling out meeting on a Sunday for this reason.

Telephone conferences

One area meeting has for many years held some of its meetings as a telephone conference - a conference call with everybody on the phone. They have found it possible to meet in a worshipful way to make decisions together, instead of all travelling. Could this work for some committees? See the section on Digital too.

Investing in people

Another area meeting made a decision to spend four thousand pounds on subsidising their residential event. They had a very successful time – fifty people came. It made the event work really well. There is an example of investing the area meeting's money in the people, not just in the buildings. It is often quite easy for us to make decisions about property matters for say four thousand pounds. But sometimes it is really hard for us to dare to spend that same amount on building the community that makes up the area meeting.

Combining for learning

Could you run some learning events jointly with another meeting? If you are going to the effort of arranging a speaker or a workshop, maybe you could combine two area meetings to learn about the same things at the same time. Some large area meetings do that in clusters of three or four local meetings together.

Eldership

Several meetings have experienced the importance of clarifying the role of elders for the area meeting in the session. It should not rest on the shoulders of the clerk alone to maintain the discipline of the worshipping meeting – elders have a responsibility. Some have taken quite clear steps to explain at the start of the meeting what our discipline is, the style of the meeting, and why. They encourage elders to play their role in area meeting, perhaps by introducing them. One area

meeting puts out a sheet on the seats, explaining the discipline of business meeting, with some examples. They have found this encouragement really aids the meeting.

Length of business

Quite a few area meeting clerks say “We really try to get our business done in an hour and a half” or two hours. Sometimes if they have really cut down the frequency, it is two and a half hours. Having that aim gives a sense of what you might need to adjust to make that possible.

Agenda-setting

Here are a few useful questions you might ask:

- Does this item really need the discernment of the whole area meeting?
- Could some preparation beforehand speed this item through to a fruitful decision point?
- Are there some items, perhaps more routine ones, which do not need a discussion in the area meeting?
- Could there be a draft minute circulated in advance or presented in the meeting for agreement? This ‘consent agenda’ approach can avoid protracted time on items that actually do not need lengthy discernment.
- How should we handle reports? Should they be sent out in advance and quite widely? Should they be spoken to or not at the meeting itself? Should some be spoken to more than others? C
- Could some be very brief or not taken with a spoken contribution at all? How much is this report really fundamental for people to talk about in the area meeting session?
- Is the area meeting in session duplicating the work that now rests with trustees? Are items going back and forth between trustees and area meeting too much? Big decisions need to come to the area meeting for a decision, but a lot of the work could have been done by the trustees. Being clear which decisions are appropriate for area meeting, and which for trustees, can make things work much more smoothly and save a lot of time, energy and feeling.
- Are we prepared to joyfully leave some topics for other people to consider?

Can there be something between the clerk and the area meeting in session?

Quite a few meetings now have ways of using some form of group, so that things do not only rest with the clerk, or do not come relatively unprocessed into the area meeting in session. This might be a preparation group; it might be an arrangements committee; it might be a committee of clerks. Some have a group where some key role-holders come, which is also open to any member or attender. In that way it is not a closed discussion, but there is a core of people present. They can help work through what business is needed, and what preparation and clarification beforehand

would help. That can really focus (and shorten) the main area meeting in session. It can also enable there to be a lower frequency of meetings because there is a group who handle some things in between.

It seems important to be clear how the area meeting can have urgent decisions taken when that is necessary. It can be very helpful to define in advance that certain types of issue can be delegated to a particular group where a decision is urgent. This can enable more time between the main area meetings, and for them to be more fruitful.

Questions to consider

- What is the area meeting for?
- How can we make area meeting an occasion that people actually want to come to?
- How much is it the discernment of the whole area meeting, if the only people who can attend are those who can spare six hours on a Sunday (including travel time) or nine hours on a Saturday (including travel), eight or nine times a year?
- Are we being inclusive?
- How often would it be good to meet?
- What are suitable days, times and places to meet?
- Shall we have a range of activities on one day, or divide them up?
- Could learning or workshops be shared with neighbours, or in clusters?
- Are we investing in building our community, as well as our buildings?
- Are there ways our elders can support the right holding of area meeting?
- How long are we aiming for our business sessions to take? Would the questions above about agenda setting help?
- Would it help to have a group that meets between area meetings?

Can you help?

The Simpler Meetings project is gathering and sharing ways that Quakers find work well for them. The aim is to liberate the joy of being a Quaker. You can learn more at www.quaker.org.uk/simplermeetings. Please send your ideas and suggestions to Jonathan Carmichael, Simpler Meetings Project Manager at JonathanC@quaker.org.uk

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