



Simpler Meetings Series

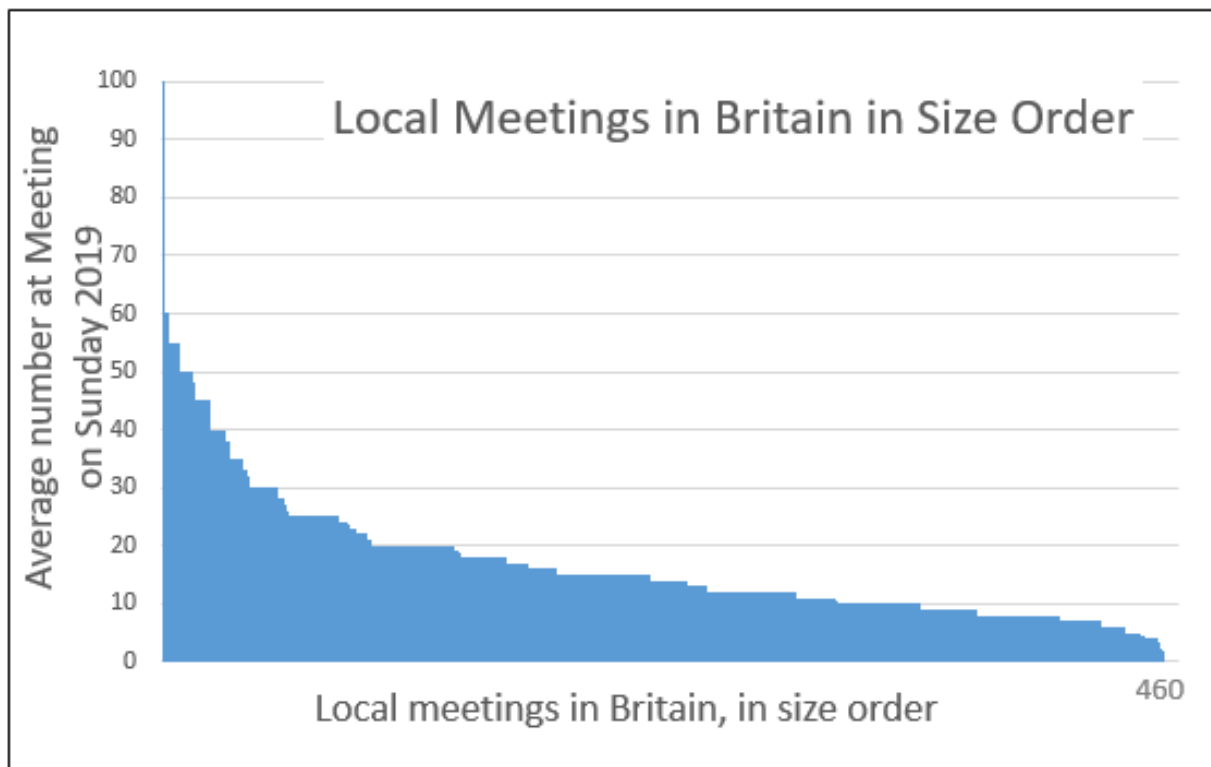
Simpler ways for small meetings

This talk is about simpler ways for small meetings, with ideas gathered from talking with Friends across Britain in the Simpler Meetings Project.

I'm Jonathan Carmichael, a Quaker from Watford Meeting in Hertfordshire, and Britain Yearly Meeting's Simpler Meetings Project Manager

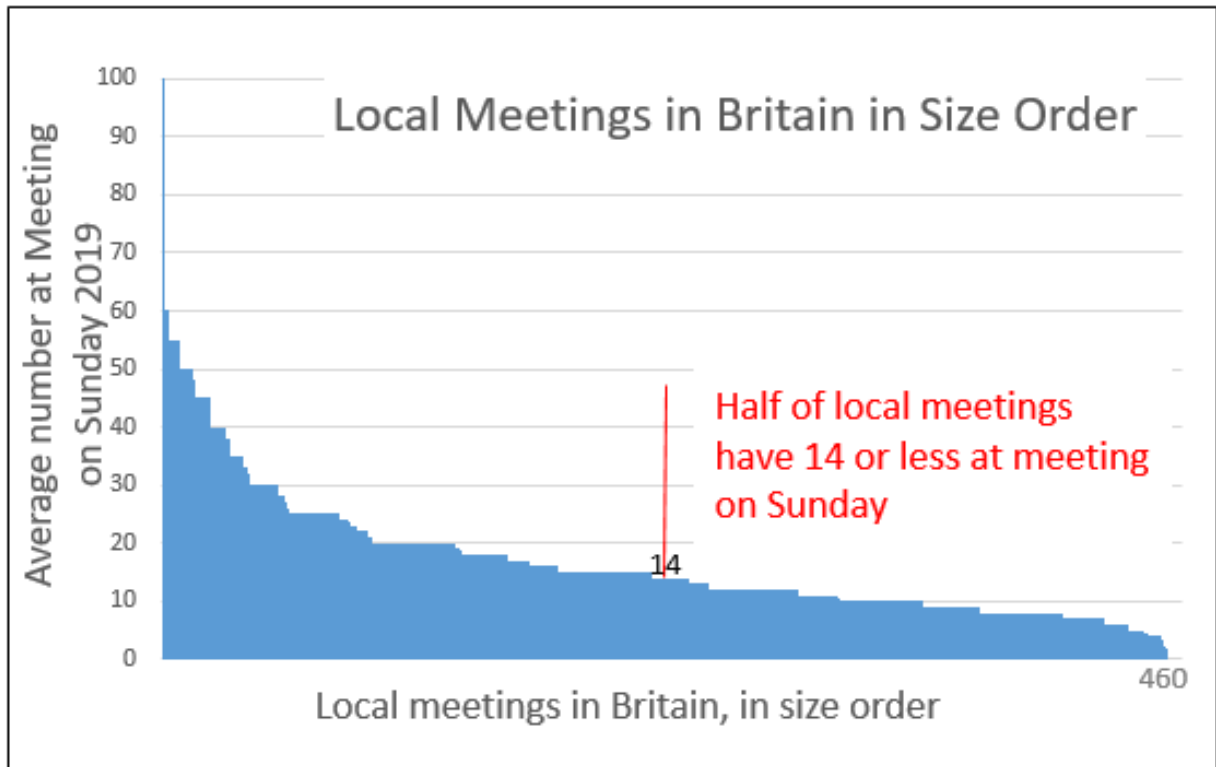
First of all, how many small meetings are there?

Here's a chart of all the 460 local meetings in Britain in 2019, in size order, showing how many people typically were at meeting on a Sunday morning:

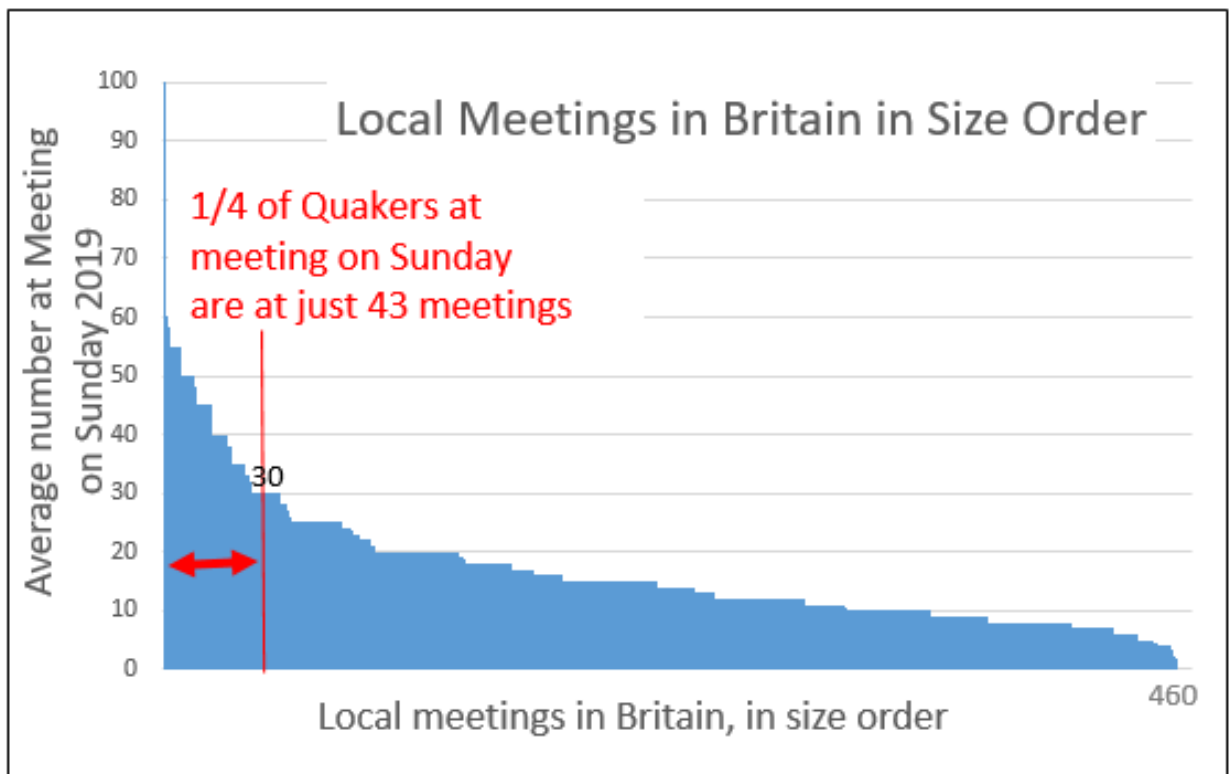


On the left are a few big ones, then it quickly comes down into the 30s and 20s. Then we get down to 10, 8, 7. on the right.

Here's the half way point – 14: **half of local meetings in Britain have 14 or less at meeting on Sunday.**

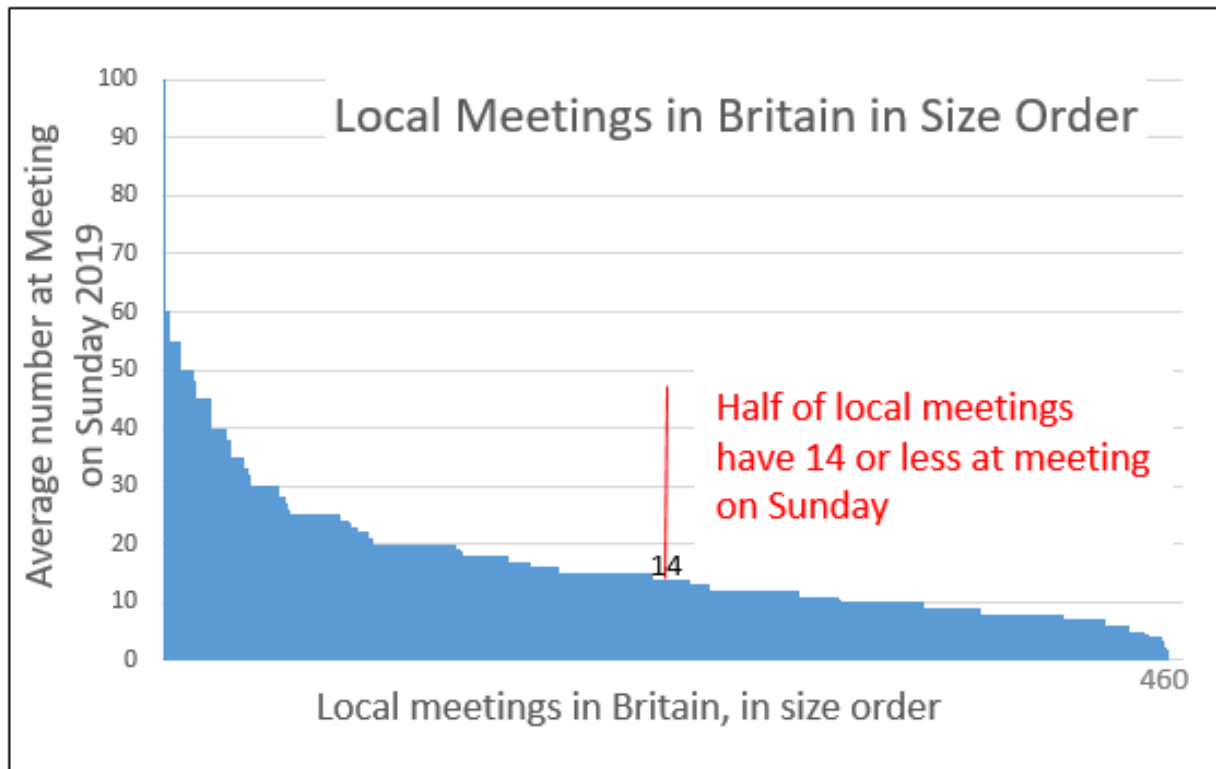


Meanwhile over on the left hand side, about a quarter of Quakers who meet on a Sunday morning are in just 43 meetings:



It's tempting to design our ways of working to fit meetings at that big end of the spectrum.

But we're looking today at the smaller meetings today. And it's really important to find ways that work for these smaller meetings.



You may remember from the Fundamentals topic in this series that there are lots of possibilities for how meetings can do things, and more permission to do things differently than many Quakers are aware of.

Quaker Faith and Practice 4.33 says "...meetings differ greatly in size. Thus the scope of work undertaken will vary but every local meeting will give due respect to Quaker values, testimonies and practice and will provide regular opportunities for public worship." Before it has a list, it says "The following responsibilities need to be considered by every local meeting although some of them may best be fulfilled in conjunction with another local meeting, or through the area meeting."

You don't have to do everything. You don't have to do everything on your own.

You don't have to do things the way a larger meeting or your last meeting does things.

You don't have to have lots of roles.

In a moment I'll give some ideas of what IS essential for a local meeting.

But first **what’s the difference between a local meeting and a worshipping group?**

In Britain Yearly Meeting, a local meeting is the smallest unit we have. We no longer have 'recognised meetings', just local meetings. And as we’ll see, local meetings can be a lot simpler than some people think.

Quaker Faith & Practice also talks about worshipping groups, though it doesn't give a solid definition.

Here’s one way of looking at this:

	Public Worship	Private Worship
Under care of a local meeting	Main meeting (<i>typically Sunday morning</i>) “Midweek meeting” (<i>at another time</i>) “Satellite meeting” (<i>at another place</i>)	Worshipping group Healing group Meeting for worship for business (etc)
Under care of an area meeting or other Quaker body	Worship at a protest (etc)	Worshipping group AM camp (etc)
Not under care of any Quaker body		Worshipping group

The major distinction is that a local meeting needs to be offering worship open to the public, while a worshipping group can be private.

A local meeting may have one main meeting – often on Sunday morning, not always. Some have a midweek meeting as well.

Some local meetings have a satellite meeting in another location, again for public worship. It may be at the same time as the main meeting, or at another time. “Satellite meeting” isn’t a formal phrase, but it’s in common use.

And a local meeting could have one or more worshipping groups too.

Worshipping groups can also be under the care of the area meeting or another Quaker body. Or they might not be under the care of any meeting in particular. However, it is very much encouraged that worshipping groups are part of a local or area meeting, and certainly if worship is public – so that matters of spiritual or legal liability can be held under their care.

Thinking about the local meeting, **what is it that's essential to be a local meeting?**

There seem to be 6 key things to highlight:

6 essentials for a local Quaker meeting

- Meeting for Worship, open to the public
- Being known and found
- A community
- Connected to other Quakers
- A clerk or a convener
- Business meetings with the Quaker method

Meeting for Worship that is open to the public. So if it's only private, it's not a local meeting.

A local meeting must be known and be able to be found. So it must be publicised and visible.

It needs to be a community: welcoming, doing things together, caring together. It's more than just the worship.

Also a local meeting needs to be connected to other Quakers, through the area meeting, through neighbouring meetings, in wider networks.

It must have a clerk or convenor. Having someone who is always clerk is not essential, but business meetings need to be clerked. You need at least a convenor, someone to get you together, and that people can contact.

Having a clerk or a convenor is deliberately written like that in Quaker faith & practice.

The 6th one is holding meetings using the Quaker business method. But this doesn't have to be every month or even every 3 months.

Everything else can be worked out in different ways – like pastoral or spiritual care - either locally or with your area meeting and with neighbouring meetings.

For example, 4.36 in QFP says other appointments “may be helpful”.

4.35 says 'there can be Friends to share these responsibilities'.

So you could say that **there's almost no difference between a very simple version of a local meeting and a worshipping group**. Apart from whether the worship is public, it

seems to come down to how much people are participating in the life of the local Quaker community, or in local business meetings.

So perhaps the journey that some people are thinking of, from being a local meeting to being a worshipping group isn't actually what they need to do – just be a more simple local meeting?

Now let's look at some things that are not essential.

Always **meeting in the same place, or at the same time** – that's not essential. Could we try experimenting with meeting at a different time or place? It might help people to come and grow the meeting.

For example, someone from Swanage meeting explained:

“A meeting not at 10.30 on a Sunday has brought in some other worshippers who cannot make normal 'Quaker time' “

Some meetings don't meet weekly. As someone from Grimsby put it:

“Perhaps not meeting every week helps to get a few more together on the weeks you do meet.”

What about meetings at someone's home once a month or once every 2 months? You could combine these with eating, discussion, a business meeting. Eating together before or after worship seems a common way for smaller meetings to build their togetherness.

People sometimes say there should be **a treasurer** in that list of essentials.

But some small meetings don't use money themselves at all. Their Friends make financial contributions direct to the area meeting. Then the area meeting pays their rent. A few meetings meet somewhere for free. Their few transactions are recorded in the area meeting accounts. This avoids them needing their own accounts, or a treasurer.

Small meetings often organise **roles** differently. There's another topic in this series about roles, so let's be specific to small meetings.

Can we be more flexible? Can we spread the tasks to better match the people available? Instead of having fixed stacks of tasks for a role, can we put them out on the table and see who could do which?

We can still have a discernment and nomination process for those combinations, but maybe we'll find the combinations in a different way.

A few small meetings have a team of 3 that cover the main functions between them. They could be a clerk, elder and treasurer, working as a team. Burnham-on-Sea meeting has a correspondent, they share the pastoral care and spiritual nurture, and one Friend is the treasurer.

Having elders, or people appointed as pastoral care friends aren't *essential* - I was surprised to learn that about 1 in 3 meetings in Britain have some form of corporate or shared approach to pastoral care or spiritual nurture.

Many meetings share the clerking role between more than one person. Doncaster meeting has a four person clerking team they find is working well.

Someone from Ely meeting put it like this:

“Consider not feeling obliged to fill every role. Get the AM to consider what it can do to help your smaller meeting - and release the joy having reduced the burden!”

Can an element of the tasks be done by someone who is paid? Such as bookkeeping, or maintaining the property or handling lettings.

Now **decisions**: small meetings can find decision making works differently. Someone from Ayrshire meeting said

“Our meetings for worship for church affairs are short and simple. We are able to be flexible and responsive if required.”

From Bethnal Green:

“It's quite informal, with infrequent and also relatively informal Business Meetings. The process by which we make decisions still feels in the Quaker tradition.”

In Great Yarmouth, they have two planned meetings per year, saying:

“Where a formal decision is needed in the interim we arrange a 'Meeting Moment' immediately after MfW and deal with just the one item.”

You may find that you just can't go on as a separate local meeting. Some small meetings may discern that the time is right to lay themselves down and join with others in another meeting. It needs careful thought, discussion and discernment with other meetings around. There can often be lots of support from other local meetings in this phase. And plenty of use of good Quaker processes.

Someone put it to me like this:

“Amalgamation can permit survival, and also promote new stimulus”.

You might **continue meeting as a satellite meeting**, joining with a neighbour to become one local meeting with two venues, as I explained earlier. Brecon meeting recently decided to become a satellite of their larger neighbour.

You might stay as a local meeting, but arrange to **do some things with other local meetings**, like learning, discussions, socials, sharing some roles, or having buddies for some roles. Some meetings undertake witness together – Wimbourne meeting and Poole meeting share a Sanctuary group working with refugees and asylum seekers. So do Doncaster and Balby meetings/

Someone told me:

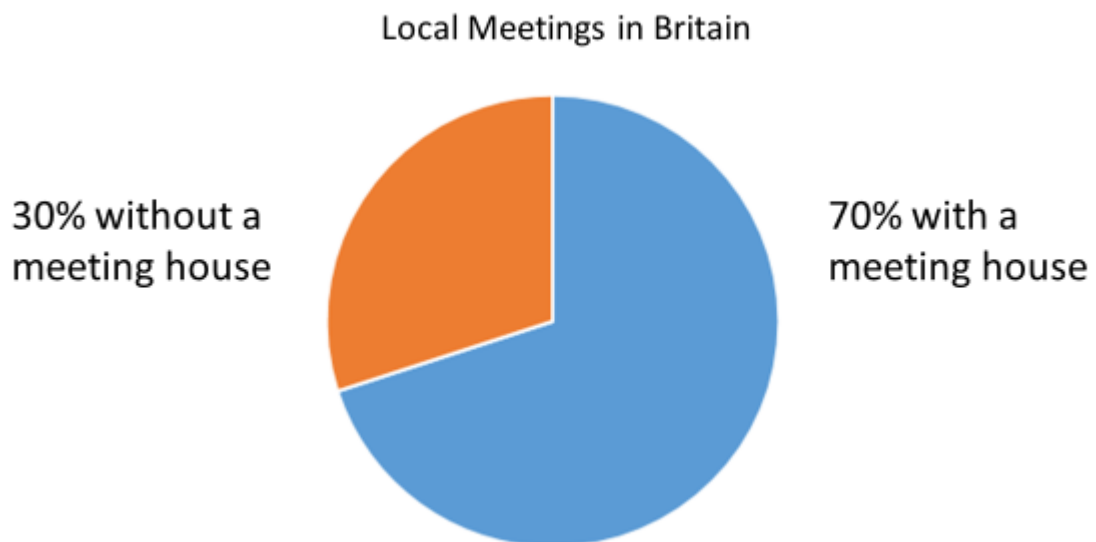
“Some Friends from other meetings come along to our meeting now and then, which is great!”

Would it be good for a small meeting to **pair** with a larger one? Or two small ones to pair? Being nearby may be most important. For example someone from Shoreham-by-Sea says: “We can link up with the larger Worthing Meeting for fellowship and taking part in any other activities. We share a regular newsletter.”

Some areas **cluster several meetings together** and deliberately do more things together.

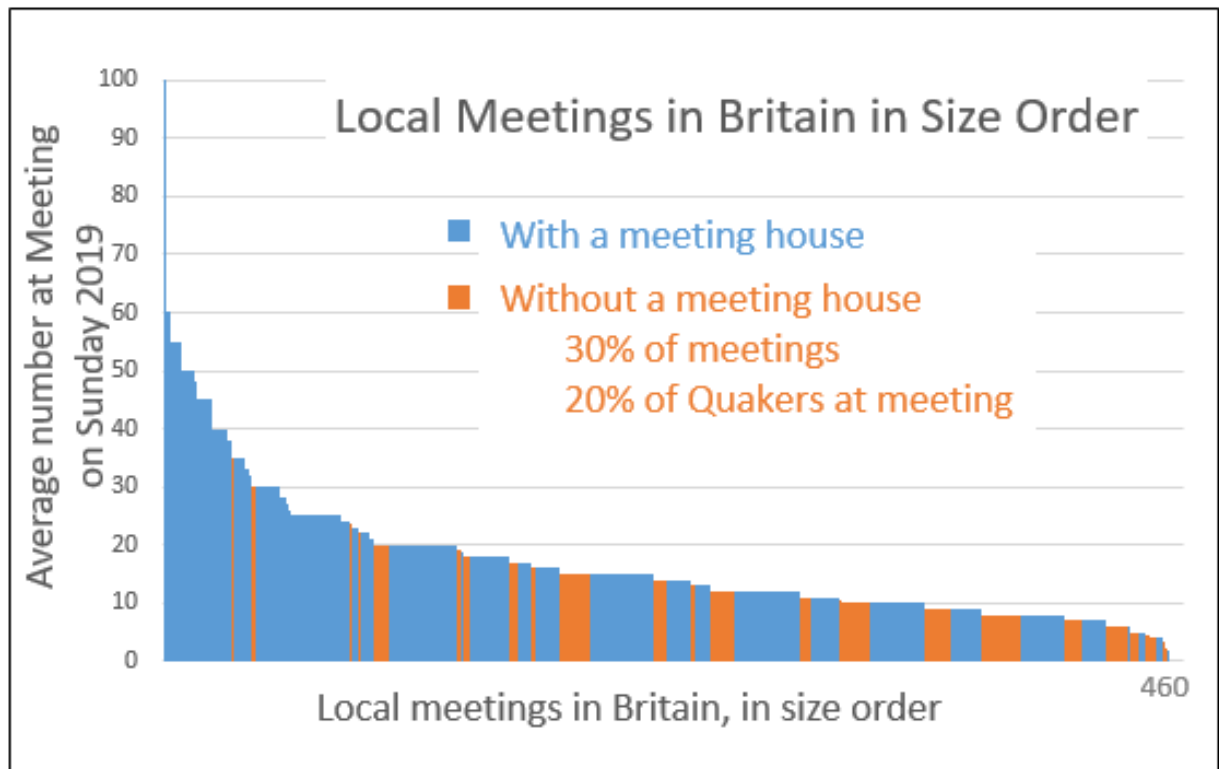
Another way to simplify is to **meet without a meeting house**. It's probably the biggest way I've found in the simpler meetings project that a meeting can simplify how it runs. Some meetings find having a meeting house brings lots of benefits, and is really worth all the effort involved, and others have concluded they don't. They find they can meet and thrive without a meeting house. **You can find lots of ideas to use when meeting without a meeting house in another topic in this series**, but here are a few highlights:

30% of local meetings in Britain don't have to look after a meeting house – about 1 in 3.



It's quite common. You could even say it's quite normal.

Here's the chart we started with, this time showing all the meetings without a meeting house in orange.



You can see there are lots of middle-sized meetings like this. Quite a few small ones, and some in the largest 10%. It's about 1 in 5 of all Quakers at worship on a Sunday in 2019.

A Friend put it to me like this:

“If you're struggling to maintain a large and expensive building as a small meeting, renting a premises takes a huge burden off your shoulders and helps you to focus on the spiritual life of the meeting.”

Someone else said:

'Enjoy it, let go, concentrate on the bare essentials. Forget the library.' (There are lots of other ways to share books.)

Another said

'Focus on what you will gain, not what you will lose.'

And

'A meeting is the people, not the building.'

So this might be an option to consider seriously.

And there are other options, like paying a person or an organisation to look after your building.

Now let's look turn to looking at things **from the area meeting perspective**.

Are we **open to different ways** of meetings filling roles or doing tasks?

Can we **reduce what must be done by each local meeting**, by sharing, grouping or deleting things? Can we handle some topics jointly? In West Somerset, Taunton meeting has run outreach events e.g. Quaker Quest, and then taken that out to outlying smaller meetings, who may not be able to organise a whole event but have one or two Friends that can take part.

Some Area Meetings are **considering a framework for learning, understanding and sharing, for the whole area**. That might be led by the eldership and pastoral care group, to plan that out and take some of the burden away from Friends responsible for that in a smaller meeting. An example of that is Devon area meeting.

Would it help to have **clusters of local meetings** and worshipping groups?

Can we appoint some **shared roles between meetings**? Or have a trustee who is the link for a small meeting.

As one Friend gently put it:

"Slightly lower expectations of what our meeting can realistically do or contribute would help".

Could we as an area meeting, organise some **premises maintenance** across several meeting houses? E.g. using the same tradespeople. Or using a property management organisation.

The crunch of this is, **an area meeting is a community**. You may need to find time as an area meeting to consciously build that community: coming together without any expectation of organising anything other than getting to know each other. You might do that through a day event, picnics, outdoor meetings. Or a residential weekend. That will allow some Friends in smaller meetings to take part. It also helps Friends know each other between local meetings so area meeting feels like a community.

A few final tips, from a survey of Quakers in small meetings:

"Do what you can."

"Share the load as much as possible and don't do what is not essential."

"Only do anything else if someone really wants to."

"If you cannot do it joyfully there is no point"

"Focus on what you can do, and just let the rest go. I remember somebody saying once that George Fox did not call Friends to set up monumental structures - he called us to wait in the Light, and be faithful."

“Find your own way. Look for allies. Do what you can. And don't be frightened of breaking the ‘rules’, looking elsewhere for nurture and support to enable you to keep your own small meeting going - regardless of area meeting boundaries. Get out into the big Quaker world (Woodbrooke, BYM, Quaker Life) coz it will give you a whole new perspective and purpose.”

“Always give priority to worship and spiritual nurture over more bureaucratic activities!”

“Don't worry if it feels messy. Encourage participation in very small ways (with emphasis on very), for example we've found getting involved in making the tea or handing out leaflets counts a lot.”

“Enjoy what you have and treasure what you already offer. More than you can imagine!”

I hope you find some of these ideas helpful, so your meeting can run more simply. You might like to watch it together in your meeting, as a starter for a discussion.

Thank you Friends.

Jonathan Carmichael

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