



Sustainability work with Bristol Area Meeting

Many Quakers across Bristol Area Meeting, both younger and older, have been very concerned about climate change and sustainability for some time. There have been ongoing discussions about the issue at area meeting level and some young people have participated in Extinction Rebellion protests or school strikes. The youth development project helped to bring these feelings and discussions together across the ages and for the area meeting to move towards collective action that was informed by young people.

Prior to this work, young people were not often involved at area meeting level and meetings were seen as 'not that interesting', as explained by one young person:

I'm 15 and not many people younger than me relate to area meeting at all... I know area meeting exists and does stuff and if I wanted to I could play a larger part in its decision-making processes... But the only time I've ever had anything directly to do with area meeting was at that Meeting for Business where we discussed sustainability.



A concern is shared and explored

A Young Friends Friday session in January 2020 was themed around climate concern and the passion and interest of young people around the topic was strongly expressed. They asked what Bristol Quakers were doing around the issue and discussed the idea of declaring a climate emergency at an area meeting. The youth development worker explains how they supported the young people's enthusiasm and facilitated the connection to area meeting:

I helped write up their concern and question and get it on the agenda for Bristol Area Meeting. In response Bristol Area Meeting asked young people through the youth project to help frame what a collective commitment to action might look like.

Young people were clear that the responsibility for such a task should rest with the adults but that they would value being involved. It was agreed that at February Area Meeting a workshop would be held around the issue, involving adults and young people. A local Friend explains the feeling of that session:

I really felt like at that meeting the issue was coming from the young people and being handed over to the meeting, in a positive way.

As a result of the workshop, Bristol Quakers developed a Sustainability Champions group of individuals who took the lead on setting out what collective, radical and proportionate climate action would look like. The group was made up of adult representatives from each local meeting and was convened by the youth worker, so that, as they explain: 'the door would be open to youth involvement.'

A survey and action

A young adult who had been involved with the youth project as both a participant and co-facilitator, took on the task of finding out what Friends thought of how their local and area meetings were approaching sustainability; how sustainable their own lives currently were, ideas for change and which areas they could use more support in. This young adult reflects on what they learnt from the exercise:

The experience I had in doing the survey was valuable and good practice...It's been interesting and developed my view on people's attitudes to changing these sorts of things and I've learnt about all the different places that people are on their journey to being sustainable.

The Sustainability Champions group have been meeting monthly online since April 2020 to address the issues identified in the survey and working independently inbetween. An action plan has been developed showing areas of work to address and examples of action that Friends might consider. A key achievement of the group was to draw up a set of 35 Advices and Queries around sustainability, which were circulated across the area meeting and made available to a wider Quaker readership as well.

Positive change

Efforts and changes around sustainability at local meeting level have been reported back to the Sustainability Champions. They include exploration of car share schemes, a public exhibition around climate change, deepened

spiritual practice, recipe share and new discussion groups that include adults and young people, among other things. A young adult feels that sustainability has also continued to be 'on the agenda more for area meetings' and notes that each area meeting newsletter contains a piece written by a Sustainability Champion to keep people in the loop.

But the most relevant change here for the youth development project has been the increased involvement of young people at area meeting level. The area meeting clerk reflects their joy at having this new engagement through the work together:

That February Area Meeting not only did we have some young people involved in the workshop, but we also had them stay for the area meeting! I believe that's the first area meeting we've ever had those in their early teenage years actually staying for the whole of the area meeting in session, which is pretty remarkable. And it's also happened since then, not often, but it has happened.

The clerk also feels there's been a following cultural shift to include young people more at area meeting level. Although this does not necessarily manifest as regular representation at area meeting, there is a greater sense of more togetherness:

The difference is that before the project, at the local and area meeting level, young people were seen as separate. There's been a lot more activity now that involves them, not necessarily at area meeting level but across the area meeting... People are working with and talking with young people in different ways. That has helped the area meeting to feel more aware of the presence of young people. It's not as tangible as seeing lots of young people in the meetings but there's a greater awareness of the need to think about and include them.

Covid-19 challenge and approach

This work took place during the Covid-19 Pandemic, a challenging time for young people, where capacity and interest for email and online engagement is stretched. The youth worker

reflects that they have found that 'although young people's care for the environment remains strong, their capacity to take action has been curtailed at this time.'

Initially, no young people chose to attend the Sustainability Champions meetings or were involved in developing the action plan. However, one young adult, who had been part of the youth project, has been involved throughout the sustainability work, attending meetings and running the survey. One year in to the work a young person joined the Champions group to represent their local meeting. Young people were consulted throughout the work and given opportunity to engage at any point, but one young person reflects on the challenge of the enforced medium of communication during this time:

I know I wasn't engaging to my full potential... it just became an endless flood of emails and it didn't feel particularly engaging... I've been given the chance to know every single little detail I could possibly want to know about it but unfortunately it hasn't sparked my interest in the way it would need to for me to be more involved.

The slow pace of change during this time has also been a challenge to keeping young people engaged with the work. The question was raised of whether to bring the issue of sustainability forward while so much was changing in people's lives, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and decisions around this sustainability work were delayed. A young person notes that the project has been continuing throughout a full year so far and that their long-term attention span is 'a couple of months'. Their parent reflects that:

My son has not lost interest in sustainability at all. But it needs things at different paces to keep young people engaged. It needs to have something else alongside the longer decision-making processes to keep them engaged.

Covid-19 also hampered ambitions to change the format of area meeting in session to be more attractive to young people. Obviously, it is not known how this work would have

developed differently in a different time. However, the clerk of area meeting feels that they would have responded to the pandemic very differently in terms of engagement with young people without the 'bridge' between younger and older people that the youth worker provided.

What made it successful

The decision was taken to have the Sustainability Champions group facilitated by the youth worker so that they could act as a 'connector' to the young people throughout the work. One young adult explains the benefit:

Because the youth worker has been doing it and knows the young people well, they know what to take to the young people and what they won't be interested in... Sometimes it feels a bit like school to them, they're fed up and they want to have fun.

It has also meant that the youth worker can work with the adults who are not the parents of the young people to support contact and also to represent the perspective of young people without them having to attend. They can also ensure that the ownership of the work around such a serious topic as sustainability is for adults to bear. This was reflected by both adults and young people and summed up by the clerk of area meeting:

The difficulty in keeping this as something that continues to involve young people across all ages is that we're very conscious it's not their problem, it's ours. We're trying to resist the 'over to you kids' aspect of it and ensure it's not too much burden on them.

Having a dedicated youth worker enabled the work to be conducted in this way that is inclusive of young people without handing it over as their responsibility.

But young people still feel like the impetus for action 'came from them' and what they are passionate about. Having a shared area of passion and concern has given adults and young people something to bond and create a relationship over. The clerk of area meeting feels

that something has changed in the way and tone that adults speak to young people:

You could often detect a kind of patronising tone before. Now it's more 'hi, how's that going?'. Something's changed in how the adults are relating to young people generally. It's a little bit more ordinary talking now.

Future

A year on from when the climate concern was first raised by the young people, at January 2021 Area Meeting, Bristol Quakers met and reconsidered how Sustainability Champions would continue to support individual and collective responses. An all-age meeting is planned for the summer, building on the work done so far and supporting each other to meet the challenges facing us all.

A young adult feels that young people are now starting to sense that if they're passionate about something then area meeting is 'a space they can turn up to with that'. The clerk of Bristol Area Meeting hopes to shift the culture and format of area meeting further in future to be more interesting and welcoming to young people. It's likely that these changes would in fact be of value to all of the Quaker community:

My hope is that we can be more proactive and visionary and go into the stuff we have to do which can be boring and tedious and dry, but be doing it with more vision, in which young people have played a part. I'd like to break out from the standard 'everything has to be done in a business meeting' plan with more workshops, more interaction and more lightheartedness in our approach to serious matters.

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