



International Older People's Day

Older People's Peer Support Zoom session – Thursday 1st October 2020

Hosted by Sue Lister, AWOC York

Present: 24 people on Zoom.

1. **Welcome** by host **Sue Lister AWOC York**. Sue thanked the following people:

- All who had joined us on Zoom today – great to see everyone
- The speakers
- Ian Sadler, insight 6 for support with technical expertise and involvement in the planning group
- Linda Stone, Self Help UK for involvement in the planning group and for doing the note-taking today.
- Ann Murray for timekeeping on the day.

Today's Zoom session will be recorded and Sue asked people to say if they didn't want to be recorded.

Sue mentioned she had been on Radio York this morning to promote today's events and celebrate International Older Person's Day.

2. **Poll** – **Sue Lister, AWOC York**

Question	Yes	No
Are you comfortable asking for help?	55%	45%
Are you comfortable giving help?	100%	0%
Are you comfortable contacting people who share your interest in something?	100%	0%
Are you comfortable using online resources?	75%	25%

These key questions of asking for help and using online resources are important things to consider throughout the rest of the session.

3. **Speakers**

a) **Joe Micheli, CYC**

Joe linked the subject of peer support to what CYC do in the city. People Helping People launched in York city and recognised that lots of people were in social isolation with rising health inequalities. Joe would like to see and build a more compassionate society through community development. York is very active and has a good voluntary sector. It is important that we can all connect more generally. Peer support is very important and a great concept. Everyone needs people and everyone needs help.

b) **Sue Lister, AWOC York**

Sue began by saying how AWOC York started and shared the screen with a slideshow. AWOC is for older people who haven't got children nearby for whatever reason. There are millions of awocs in this country and the world. AWOC is part of the loneliness and isolation issue. The launchpad was a workshop in the York 50+ Festival on 2 Oct 2015 on how to set up an AWOC group. There were several speakers, good publicity and a chance to share the experience of ageing without children. This was the start of a monthly peer support group. Now there are about 150 members of AWOC York who are still keeping in touch through the pandemic by weekly Zoom meetings.

c) **Sarah Collis, Self Help UK**

Happy International Older Person's Day! Self Help UK is a national organisation based in Nottingham and we support people to set up groups. We work with groups face-to-face (if not restricted!) and help with training, funding, advice and support leaders to run their groups. We work with over 300 groups in

Nottinghamshire and we work in a supporting role – with our phrase being “On tap, not on top.” We have also done research and supported universities. We are excited to be joining in with peer support discussions today.

d) Ian Anderson – Heworth Retired Men’s Forum (HRMF)

I was Chairman for some years so our current Chairman, Alan Humphries who has only been in office for 2 years, has asked me to speak today. The Forum is a group of lively retired men from their 70s to their 90s who meet fortnightly from September to May to hear talks of topical interest with the occasional outing to places like the Yorkshire Air Museum. Topics range from climbing Stromboli volcano to gardens of Yorkshire, being a Chelsea Pensioner, foreign travel and talks by charities such as Guide Dogs, Yorkshire Air Ambulance and the hospices. Each year we are able to donate several hundred pounds to local charities.

Our peer support comes from the fact that we look out for each other as several of our members are in their 90s and widowers and one is over 100 and in a care home. Our Chairman has been doing a great job keeping in touch during lockdown. E.g. one of our members who lives alone was 99 recently and 4 of us went to see him in his garden and took a cake and a card to cheer him up. We also try and offer support to members who are bereaved.

It was all started about 40 years ago by 2 men from Rowntrees as Nestlé was then called. We call ourselves Heworth RMF purely because we meet at Heworth Community Centre but members come from all over the area and from all walks of life – policemen, railway and telephone engineers, solicitors, and teachers. New members come from personal introduction though also from adverts in Local Link and the Council website. So all retired men are welcome when we start up again.

e) David Roberts – York Carers Forum

Kate and Irene began the York Carers Forum in 2008. Both had worked at Meadowbeck Nursing Home in Osbaldwick, York, and knew what it was like to care for someone and try and find help. The group has not been government funded although it has received the occasional grant from City of York Council.

The Forum became a registered charity in 2010. The reason it stopped being one in 2019 was that the Forum had to pay a regular fee for being a registered charity. In return it would receive a regular payment of just £200.00 which was paltry.

The Forum has saved money this year mainly through not having to pay for venues during the pandemic. Their revenue is through fund-raising and people contributing to refreshments and bringing in items to sell. The Forum used to hold regular raffles but the regulations of their current venue, the Quaker Meeting House, currently prevent them from doing so. If the York Carers Forum folds then the money that remains will be donated to a charity.

Finding venues for meetings has been difficult. In the last ten years the York Carers Forum has met at the Hilton Hotel, Monkgate; City Mills, Skeldergate; and the Quaker Meeting House, Friargate. Venues can be expensive. City Mills only cost £20.00, while a room at the Quakers Meeting House costs between £70.00 to £80.00 - and that's a cheap day! At the moment other alternative venues such as Spark in Piccadilly and the Brigantes pub in Micklegate are being looked into.

The age of York Carers Forum members is between fifty and eighty but membership tends to rise and fall. The reasons include a lack of suitable, easy to access venues, lack of public transport and people dying. In recent years there were some outings but these folded due to lack of interest.

The York Carers Forum is a place where people with caring experience can meet and help each other. Often the group has speakers who will give talks on activities or where to get help and advice. If groups like these are to survive then they need suitable venues, easy to access public transport and some form of guaranteed and regular financial support. It's all very well to rely on and praise non-charitable support groups but they do struggle and need help. With all meetings and events cancelled due to Covid-19 for the present, the future of the York Carers Forum - and other, similar groups - is up in the air.

f) Anne Norfolk – Dignity in Dying Yorkshire

Have you ever thought about dying? Either your own death or that of a loved one?

We are a group from diverse backgrounds but all believing that we should have autonomy over our own death. Many of us have had experience of a loved one's pain and suffering at the end of life, or even the trauma of having to travel to Dignitas in Switzerland, This surely can't be right. We believe that everyone should have the choice in this country, especially if terminally ill, to determine when and how they should die. It's not an easy subject but as it affects all of us eventually we believe it should be considered, discussed openly and any personal wishes recorded, for example by making a Lasting Power of Attorney or Advance Decision, which are hopefully adhered to. It is quite usual, in fact encouraged, to make a birth plan for the arrival of a baby so why not a death plan for the opposite end, when let's face it you'll know more about it anyway! We try to encourage open discussion and point out that at the moment we are not legally able to have the choice of an assisted death, if that is our wish, in this country.

We work with Dignity In Dying a national campaigning organisation trying to influence MPs to act on what the majority of the country (84%) have indicated they would like, which is to change the law to allow assisted dying. Also we promote the ethos of Compassion in Dying, preparation for the of end of life by putting into place Advance Decisions, Lasting Powers of Attorney, Living Wills etc.

Our group was formed in February 2014 and for a few years hosted regular meetings, addressed other groups, pressurised MPs and the medical profession, held information stalls and petitions etc. but unfortunately due to personal circumstances we haven't been as active for some time. The good news is that the group is about to be reformed under an enthusiastic new leader Astrid Hartland. She would love to hear from anyone who may be interested.

This is quite fortunate as, due to the dramatic effect that Covid-19 could have on our lives, more people than ever are thinking of their own mortality so maybe, hopefully, the medical profession and MPs will take this on board, respect our wishes and act on them to change the law, which would allow us choice and dignity in our final days.

If you wish to find out more about our group, Sue who is a member of our group wrote a poem which summarises admirably our thoughts so I've asked her if she would share it with us: Terminal 1.

g) Ron Willits – Dunnington Table Tennis

We play table tennis twice weekly. There are various ages with one or two juniors and the rest are aged 50-80. Ron started with football, then later distance running and then looked for another sport. Table tennis can be played to a good age. We play mostly doubles and try to be quite relaxed about the game. We also hold social events and a bit of competition. We have a membership of about 40 members who enjoy each other's company and have developed good friendships.

h) Ballroom and Sequence Dancing – Sue Lister (gave an overview on behalf of John)

These ballroom and sequence dance groups have unfortunately wound down due to difficulties re dancing and physical contact in Covid-19 times. Dance groups of all kinds around York can no longer meet to dance. For people who dance up to three times a week, it leaves a gaping hole in their lives.

i) Helen Widdowson – Spare Handle Co-Housing

Helen lost her husband 5 years ago. She investigated co-housing which is where people live in separate homes with communal facilities and perhaps share meals if they want to. They have 10 active members of the group. They are developing ideas, have a series of online workshops and a Facebook page. They are working towards a supportive sustainable community.

j) Rachel Jenkins ideas – LINKS (Sue Lister on behalf of Rachel)

Rachel is 91 years of age and came up with the idea that people at grassroots level could develop their own ways of communicating and interacting with others in the village. It hasn't taken off as it needs a Driver or two to pull it together – as with any self-help group. Sue spoke of the grassroots concept - how can we grow our own local support from grassroots upwards despite increasing centralisation?

4. Verbal comments raised

Neil Cutler: If moving to high tech, we need access to good broadband. Important to note with the introduction of fibre broadband there are significant price increases. Neil gave the example of an increase from £29 - £44 per month.

Sarah Collis: Comments about the complex health issues is important. When setting up self-help groups, people often meet due to health issues and we have an ageing population. It can keep you well by being part of a group. Research in Australia has provided evidence that the more you do and the more you become involved with others equates to living longer. This is particularly pertinent in villages and rural areas where people often stay well for longer. It is important we meet each other if isolated.

Sarah gave the example of herself who retired from work at 27 due to health issues. She was on her own, had no children and became very lonely. Sarah found a group and reached out. It took strength to reach out and ask for help but this changed everything for her. The mindset changed from what I *can't* do to what I *can* do and the need to do things differently - like take more rest. She wanted to be back out there in the world. There is a benefit to how we connect and show that it's possible to others. When people first go to self-help groups, they may seem withdrawn, have low confidence. People then settle in, open up and can often be the first person to welcome new members. This is called the Helper Principle. When you help someone else, you feel better. We feel better in ourselves. This is what self-help is all about.

Now we are in a world that's becoming more digital, groups have a real power to help people to use technology. We have to be creative, how we talk and how we reach out to others. Also we should still use old-fashioned ways e.g. the phone, write to each other and encourage more people to keep connected.

George Wood: Going to something for the first time can be difficult and is a barrier. Going *with* someone can open a door. He can relate to Sarah Collis's comments. How you are welcomed, how you feel could decide whether you go to the group for a second time! What is going on in the city of York regarding social prescribing? Is there a connection there? There is a lot of money going to social prescribing in York.

Sue Lister: People can access the city activities and services website, Live Well York. Perhaps every city could have a similar resource? Mental health is now as important as physical health.

Sarah Collis: re George's comments: social prescribing is great and helps the medical profession. In some areas the way they do social prescribing is that they say just go along to the group. The transition could be made easier for people. There are examples of some poor experiences out there. It is important that groups encourage engagement with social prescribers but there is still a lot to learn. Nottingham Trent University has been one of the leading researchers into social prescribing and they have developed a course. If you have experience of how to engage people then let social prescribers know.

Heidi Moon: Heidi is one of the Social Prescribers working in Primary Care via GP surgery. She didn't know about Self Help UK so will take a look at the website and said it was good to learn of such organisations. In the York area, Live Well York is an excellent resource for her. Part of her role means that she provides support for people which sometimes means she will go to a meeting or event with them. The Social Prescriber's role is to create a working relationship with someone and the organisation. Visiting a new group can be daunting for people. Heidi says she can help with IT etc., but appreciates that some people are not interested in getting involved. The current climate is difficult for people.

Julie Gray: Commented on the issue of social interaction with others. Research shows that this can cause mental health problems. It's not just about tech – it's about physical interaction. When people lose this, they lose something vital. Physical touch is very important as chemicals are released to help mood etc. Physical contact is so important and this is a critical risk during the pandemic for those socially isolated.

Neil Cutler: Spoke about his own situation of losing a partner after 41 years together. Neil is a member of the LGBT community and said that a large proportion of this community will be awocs. Neil talked about the majority of organisations being most probably 'straight' and not always accepting of members of the LGBT community. The York LGBT Forum is very supportive, however other organisations need to be more welcoming and accepting of LGBT members.

David Roberts: There needs to be more support for people after a person has died. Those in authority think that when the person has died, then no further help is needed for the surviving relative. He also said that he received no support from a previous employer when he lost a relative.

Helen Widdowson (Spare Handle Co-Housing): Isolated people get less than an hour's contact with others per day. We need community bubbles. This is the reason she has put her heart into creating co-housing support.

5. Comments from the Zoom Chat Box

David Roberts: mentioned the difficulty in finding venues that are ok, accessible, affordable and fit needs of the group.

Monica – Re the Poll: some people are not in a position to give help.

Sarah Collis:

100% of self-help members have more people they can talk to
95% members report making new friends
82% members report less dependency on professional workers such as GPs or social workers
83% members report they are doing more exercise
Being in a group extends capacity and helps people to live longer.

Julie Gray: There are gaping holes – lack of mobility, massive health inequalities, socially isolated, those who don't have children – who are in an exceptionally difficult position.

Joe Micheli: people can be supported to access digital support but we need to do more. Key messages from Covid-19 – we need to address this as a society.

Jim Cannon: Very strong contribution from Julie Gray. Can we have more information that we can look at and follow up?

Sarah Collis: Thank you everyone – for doing what you do to connect people to help each other. It's so inspiring and why we at Self Help UK want to help. Please get in touch and keep us up to date with how things are going in York. We are here to help if we can and offer free training and support to self-help group leaders. Happy to be involved in future Zoom events to help answer some of these questions.

6. Summary and close – Sue Lister

Unfortunately there wasn't enough time for a deeper discussion on peer support and self-help groups. However Sue asked people to consider the questions for themselves.

Post meeting note: After the OPPS event we would like to put together an anonymised record of our experiences and thoughts about the value of peer support for submission to MPs, local councillors, relevant decision-makers, and anyone else you can think of!

If this sets you thinking, please can you set aside a little time to put down some memories, feelings, ideas, comments and answers to these questions? A few sentences would be helpful.

a) Why and how did you first join a peer support group? How did it feel?

b) What are the benefits to yourself....and to group members?

c) What are the obstacles to your participation/the continuation of the group and what are possible solutions?

d) What are the differences between self-help and organised groups - pros and cons?

Finally, Sue mentioned there were two different sessions this afternoon on Zoom to celebrate International Older Person's Day.

Sue thanked everyone for joining us today and the meeting was closed.