

Vibrancy in Meetings programme evaluation main report: Executive summary

Background

Vibrancy in Meetings (Vibrancy) is a three-year pilot programme that forms part of the support structure offered to Quaker meetings. It is being provided jointly by the national body of Quakers (Britain Yearly Meeting, BYM¹) and Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre (Woodbrooke) in four regions between March 2016 and December 2019. Vibrancy aims to support local and area meetings to become strong, connected, confident and sustainable and to contribute to a vibrant yearly meeting. This is delivered through support from four development workers, managed by a national programme co-ordinator, all part time. It is also hoped that Vibrancy will help improve the support offered by BYM and Woodbrooke.

In October 2016, BYM commissioned NCVO Charities Evaluation Services (NCVO CES) to conduct a three-year evaluation of the programme. This is the main report of this evaluation and is to be used primarily for internal decision making.

This report is based on: a survey of 141 Friends with whom the programme has worked; telephone interviews with 18 Friends; interviews with the Vibrancy team and other BYM and Woodbrooke staff; a review of Vibrancy monitoring data and central data from BYM and Woodbrooke.

What Vibrancy offers to Friends

1. Over the course of the programme, **the Vibrancy team have extended their reach to most meetings in their regions.**
 - Development workers have worked with at least 60% of local meetings in their regions, with one reaching almost 100%.
 - Workers have supported all area meetings in their regions. Contacts with area meetings make up between 23% and 43% of all logged contacts.
2. **The majority of worker contacts with Friends are relatively brief** (up to two hours). However, workers



¹ The term 'BYM' describes the whole organisation of Quakers in Britain. The term can refer to the whole organisation, but also to the teams of staff (mainly based at Friends House), and Friends who offer service (such as through the Quaker Life network, members of Quaker Stewardship Committee, Quaker Life clusters, Turning the Tide trainers). Where possible, the text indicates which use of the term is meant. Services delivered by Woodbrooke may be through staff, or the Woodbrooke tutors' network.

are also offering longer contacts (of more than three days, in total), some over months; this is a significant investment of time from workers with part-time roles.

3. **Vibrancy staff are now delivering much of the direct support work to Friends themselves**, rather than simply 'signposting' to BYM and Woodbrooke. Where needed, Vibrancy can involve the relevant part of BYM or Woodbrooke for additional – sometimes specialist – support.
4. While workers are offering support on all areas described in *Our faith in the future*,² the themes of *community* and *Quaker discipline* comprise almost 40% of all presenting needs.

Presenting needs



Satisfaction

Vibrancy is rated very highly by Friends: **96% of Friends in our survey rated support from Vibrancy as 'excellent' or 'good'**, and all said the Vibrancy worker was approachable. Almost all respondents felt the worker had a good level of knowledge around the issues they had offered Friends support on, and had met their meeting's needs.

In particular, Friends valued: the ability of workers to connect them with other people and meetings; the accessibility of the workers; their personal qualities and skills. They appreciated the workers' ability to listen to Friends, understand the issues they were facing and provide high-quality support.

I think the most helpful thing about the Vibrancy programme is that each of us knows that she is there for us, is easily contactable and is willing to do what we would like. That's a first for us and I think everyone appreciates that. (Friend interviewee)

² <https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/our-faith-in-the-future>

Learning from support delivery

1. An important part of the development worker role is listening to and encouraging meetings. Increasingly, workers are involved in in-depth support projects.
2. Workers are often dealing with practical problems that may be hampering spiritual growth and preventing a meeting becoming more vibrant.
3. The development worker role is emerging as one that needs to be a topic generalist, to enable the correct identification of needs. But workers also need to have specialist skills in supporting meetings and encouraging spiritual growth.
4. Some effective joint work is being undertaken by Vibrancy with BYM and Woodbrooke. However, Vibrancy staff have sometimes had difficulties in referring Friends on to BYM and Woodbrooke because of lack of capacity in the two organisations or the nature of the support offered.
5. Workload continues to be a significant problem for Vibrancy staff. Several Friends were concerned that the development workers were spread too thinly across large regions; as a result they might wear themselves out in the role, or at the least be unable to provide in-depth support.

Satisfaction



Felt the Vibrancy worker was approachable.



Said the worker had a good level of knowledge around the issues that they had supported with.



Felt the worker provided support that met their local/area meeting or group's needs.



Felt the support provided met their own needs.

Outcomes for Friends

Outcomes for individuals

Friends report significant personal outcomes as a result of Vibrancy support.

- **Feeling supported:** Almost 90% of 130 survey respondents felt supported by their worker; 81% felt better able to support their local/area meeting or group.
- **Happier, more confident role holders:** 10 of 16 role holders we interviewed said Vibrancy had helped them enjoy their role more; a further four said their experience of their role had improved.

My role has become easier because the workload has reduced. That works out as being more enjoyable. The job was getting in the way of family life, so it's also eased situations at home for me. (Friend interviewee)
- **Changed thinking:** 79% of 129 survey respondents said the Vibrancy worker had helped their meeting or group generate ideas about its future direction. Some noted that the worker's skills in facilitation had helped, for example by gently drawing out Friends' own ideas.

Outcomes for meetings

Outcomes for meetings were reported across all the theory of change³ outcome areas of *community, Quaker discipline, active values, collaboration, visibility* and *meeting for worship*. Friends said they had had access to a wide range of support on these topics, from Vibrancy, BYM and Woodbrooke. All were thought to have contributed to the outcomes, although respondents felt that Vibrancy was the biggest contributor.

The largest number of reported changes, and those most directly linked to the effects of Vibrancy, were in the areas of community, Quaker discipline, and collaboration. Examples of changes reported⁴ include:

- The majority (26 of 32 meetings for which it was relevant) felt more confident in **making meetings more accessible to newcomers**; a third had implemented changes.
She has made us think about where we hold our meetings – are they on good public transport routes, and when we’re holding them. We usually hold meeting on Saturday, but one was on a Sunday. But Sunday is more difficult for public transport, but [our Vibrancy worker] has kept us alert to thinking about that.
(Friend interviewee)
- About half (17 of 39 meetings) said they were now **spending more time together outside of meeting for worship**.
The Vibrancy project opens the possibilities for wider and different ways to relate through my spirituality, without having to go outside of Quakers. (Friend interviewee)
- Just over half (16 of 27 meetings for which this was relevant) had **improved their support for people in or considering roles**. Fifteen of 26 reported **better acknowledgement, and using, of Friends’ gifts**. One explained how, following Vibrancy support, they now try and fit the roles round Friends’ gifts, rather than the other way around.
- Just over half (14 of 26 meetings for which this was relevant) said they had become **better at handling conflict**.
We’ve appreciated the role of elders more – how they need to be more visible and active in their roles. They traditionally just shake hands at the end of the meeting but there’s also the question of their role in maintaining discipline in the meeting. Making sure that people give space and listen between contributions and avoid hurtful things. We had let that part of the role slip a bit and we’re focusing on it more now. (Friend interviewee)
- About three-quarters (14 of the 19 meetings for which this was relevant) reported **more shared projects with other meetings or organisations**.
- About half (8 of 17 meetings for which this was relevant) had taken **more action on social**

³ The theory of change was developed by NCVO CES with the Vibrancy team and other BYM and Woodbrooke staff members in early 2017. It sets out the changes and benefits that may come about for Quaker meetings, and for BYM and Woodbrooke, through Vibrancy support. It is based around the themes set out in *Our faith in the future*. Note that as a pilot programme, Vibrancy was intended to be open and responsive to meetings’ needs, rather than seeking only achievement of these outcomes.

⁴ Our evaluation was unable to gather within-meeting consensus. Where an outcome was reported, it means one person from that meeting has reported it. Other Friends from that meeting may not have reported the same thing.

issues. The same number reported running **more events or outreach activities to increase visibility.**

- About half (17 of 33 meetings) reported a **deeper quality of ministry** at their meetings.
- A small number of meetings worked with by Vibrancy have not yet experienced any outcomes.

According to BYM monitoring data, there is no evidence as yet that Vibrancy has affected overall statistics on diversity, member or attender numbers or meeting attendance levels. This could be due to these changes not having happened yet; some of them might be anticipated in the longer term. However, there is also concern that central monitoring is not able to capture changes adequately, perhaps because of limitations in systems or because the systems were not designed to collect this data.

What helps or hinders change

Vibrancy, BYM and Woodbrooke were all thought to have contributed to these outcomes, although respondents felt that Vibrancy was the biggest contributor⁵ in all areas except active values, where BYM played a greater part. Vibrancy has the most effect on community and Quaker discipline outcomes, where most support has been given.

The nature of Vibrancy delivery enables outcomes. Some Friends said they were likely to act on suggestions made by their Vibrancy worker because they were credible and known. Support provided locally over time was also considered important for change, spurring Friends on 'through hiccups'.

Lack of resilience within meetings hampers change. For Friends, barriers to change included lack of time or energy, an ageing membership and a small number of people within the meeting being prepared to take action. Some Friends were continuing to struggle with accessibility issues, particularly for children and young people.

Work with BYM and Woodbrooke

The amount of joint work between Vibrancy and BYM and Woodbrooke has been increasing, and relevant staff are meeting more frequently. Work with Woodbrooke has focused on supporting meetings through events, including some that have been co-created with the Vibrancy team. Vibrancy staff have also provided local intelligence to Woodbrooke prior to support provision. Joint work with BYM teams has included: shared planning; developing new resources; supporting meetings together, in particular on conflict; Vibrancy contributing to BYM events.

To date, partnership working has been limited by a lack of time, for both the Vibrancy team

⁵ Note that this was a survey to people who had received Vibrancy support and chosen to engage with the survey. This sample might be more likely to describe Vibrancy as having more effect on their work. There may be other Friends who have had a different experience.

and other BYM and Woodbrooke staff. The nature of Vibrancy, in term of its presence in only a few regions and the relatively short-term nature of the pilot, have limited some options for joint working. Some BYM staff noted that the organisation hadn't fully been prepared for Vibrancy before it started, and that this had hampered its integration. BYM and Woodbrooke may not yet have fully adapted to the different and new way that Vibrancy works, in particular remote, regional working.

Some relationships between Vibrancy and central staff at both organisations are strong. However some members of the Vibrancy team felt that some BYM staff have been reluctant to work with them, and felt that there was sometimes a divide between them and the central teams. One Vibrancy team member reported feeling undervalued by BYM.

Further work is needed to ensure the Vibrancy team becomes – and feels – more integrated within BYM and Woodbrooke teams, and that joint working with both BYM and Woodbrooke is undertaken where appropriate to best meet the needs of Friends. Despite this, a number of staff respondents from across Vibrancy, central BYM and Woodbrooke talked with excitement about the potential for more future working.

Outcomes for BYM and Woodbrooke

As a result of Vibrancy, Friends are learning more about BYM and Woodbrooke; Vibrancy is also beginning to promote mutual understanding between Friends and the two central organisations, with BYM and Woodbrooke staff developing and building on their existing knowledge of Friends' needs through their Vibrancy colleagues.

There was strong evidence from the evaluation survey and interviews that Vibrancy is increasing Friends' use of BYM and Woodbrooke resources. However, central monitoring data does not show this yet, except for a small increase in Woodbrooke on-the-road course bookings; there is also no evidence in the geography of BYM/Woodbrooke delivery as a result of Vibrancy. Possible reasons include: Vibrancy is now doing more of the delivery itself; limitations to central monitoring; insufficient time for on-the-ground changes to be felt.

Evaluation data suggests Vibrancy workers are articulating meetings' needs and best practice to BYM and Woodbrooke on their behalf, rather than meetings doing this directly themselves, as had been initially suggested.

There are some promising indications of Vibrancy affecting Woodbrooke's events delivery. Several of the development workers have been working with BYM staff around conflict in meetings, and new approaches are being developed as a result. Vibrancy workers have a particular role to play in identifying a shared need across their area and bringing those Friends together to access BYM or Woodbrooke support. There is also early evidence that support from Vibrancy has enabled some Friends to get more out of BYM or Woodbrooke support, or access it more easily, than they might otherwise have done.

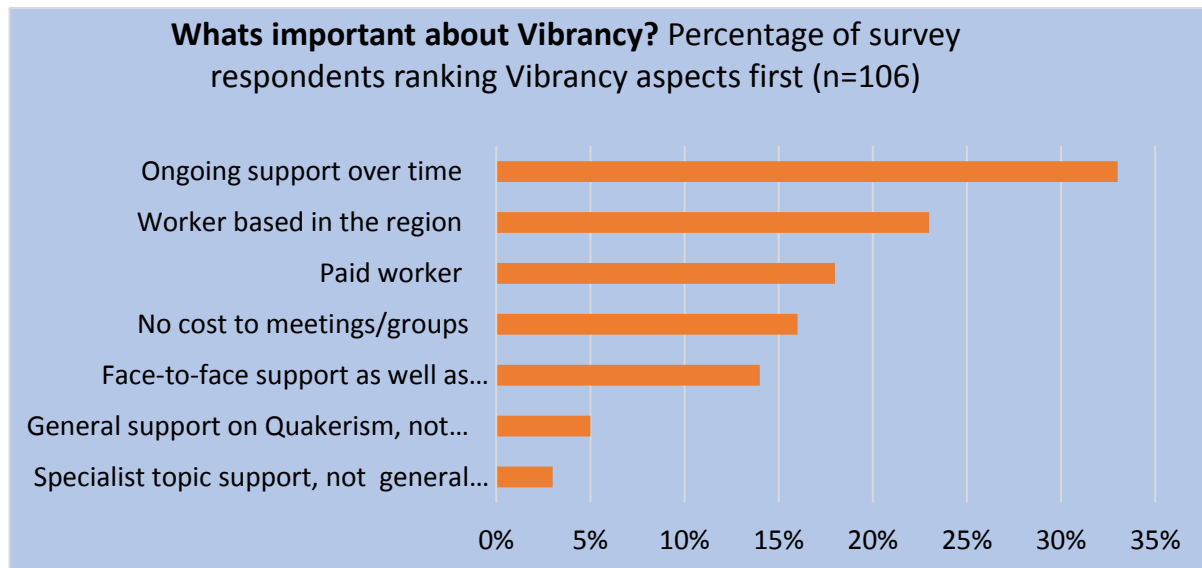
There is very limited evidence that Vibrancy has affected Friends' active engagement in wider

Quaker society, although it would be very early for such changes to be seen. Joint working was already taking place between BYM and Woodbrooke and the data for this report does not indicate any effect from Vibrancy on the amount of this joint working.

What is important about Vibrancy?

Friends value the long-term support of someone who is accessible and knows the local context, and the ability to build personal, trusting relationships with the same individual over time. These relationships are felt important for Vibrancy workers to really understand the needs of meetings. Still significant, but of lesser importance to Friends are having a worker who is paid, and who is a skilled generalist. Topic specialisms are welcome, but not regarded as essential. Overall, respondents found Vibrancy support very different from that available from BYM and Woodbrooke. This is to be expected given the very different nature of the two types of support, but there may be some positive learning from Vibrancy around accessibility and approachability.

This long-term personal support, delivered by a skilled worker and based on deep understanding of local meetings and the local context, has meant that rather than simply signposting to BYM and Woodbrooke, Vibrancy staff are now delivering much of the work themselves. However, Friends described using support from Vibrancy, BYM and Woodbrooke on the same issues, and reported that the three all contribute significantly to outcomes. Many Friends were clear that, although Vibrancy is different, the contrasting forms of support could also work together; it may be that acting together, they are more than the sum of their parts.



Summary and recommendations

Vibrancy is a successful programme, well received by the Friends it has supported, and bringing about significant outcomes for the meetings with which it has worked. This evaluation has found evidence that Vibrancy has contributed to outcomes for local and area meetings in all six of the outcome areas described in the programme theory of change.

Recommendations for the remainder of the pilot

1. Consider ways to engage with Friends about what Vibrancy might look like beyond the pilot, and/or exit planning, as appropriate.
2. Agree on what good integration of the Vibrancy team into other BYM and Woodbrooke structures might look like, and what levels of joint working between Vibrancy and BYM/Woodbrooke teams are desirable.
3. Nurture, support and promote the good joint working that has recently started between Vibrancy and BYM/Woodbrooke teams. Find ways to ensure the Vibrancy team are, and feel, valued by and integral to the two organisations.
4. Find ways to reduce development worker workload.
5. Consider ways to improve BYM and Woodbrooke monitoring to better track the longer-term outcomes of Vibrancy. This could include finding different ways to measure Vibrancy success, rather than, for example, uptake of BYM or Woodbrooke resources.
6. Consider a brief review of the theory of change, in particular the outcomes for BYM and Woodbrooke. For a few of these, there is no evidence that they have occurred (for example that Vibrancy will increase joint working between BYM and Woodbrooke), and it may be that they are no longer relevant.

Recommendations for beyond the pilot

1. For staffing any future programme, BYM and Woodbrooke should consider:
 - The skills required for development workers and the definition of, and interplay between, specialist and generalist skills.
 - The ideal team size. The current Vibrancy team size appears to work well, given the nature of remote working. How would a larger team affect this?
 - Whether locally-based, skilled Friends offering unpaid service might appropriately complement the work of paid development staff.
2. The following aspects of a future programme's delivery would merit consideration:
 - Whether workers' geographical boundaries could be flexible according to Friends' needs and workers' capacity.
 - Whether an alternative approach to day-to-day monitoring might be appropriate. The Vibrancy workers have sometimes struggled with the monitoring spreadsheet developed with NCVO CES.
3. The intended outputs and outcomes of any new programme should be considered carefully.
 - The current theory of change would be a good starting point but needs a deep review. As Vibrancy has changed and evolved, the underlying theory may need to follow suit.
 - The Vibrancy pilot has shown there is considerable need around the basics of Quakerism, meetings and processes. A new programme should address this focus.
 - It might be helpful to consider the anticipated timescales of anticipated outcomes; the view of a number of respondents in this evaluation was that some of the outcomes were long term, some beyond the lifetime of the pilot.
4. Any new programme should have an extensive internal planning and communications phase prior to the work starting.