

The role of an Advocate for Children and Young People's work at Area Meeting level and an overview of the wider context of CYP in BYM

Children and Young People in Quakerism

Recognition of the importance of the spiritual experiences of children and young people comes directly from our testimony to Equality. Most Friends will be aware in early Quaker history of notable events involving Quaker children, such as 1663, when the children of Reading Meeting and Bristol meetings kept the Meeting for Worship going, while their parents and other adults were imprisoned under the 1662 Quaker Act, which made it illegal for 5 or more Quakers to worship together. In more recent times, young people have reminded older Friends about matters of principle and conscience, which they have lost sight of, such as calling for disinvestment from the Quaker founded Barclays Bank, in the 1970s and 80s when it was associated with propping up the Apartheid regime in South Africa.

National and local structures

Work with children and young people across Britain Yearly Meeting remains a strong and vibrant part of British Quakerism in the 21st century, but sadly, like many other religious groups, our meetings are increasingly ageing. This is combined with a very small proportion of meetings making regular provision for children, young people and families. While there are isolated examples of active children's meetings and young people's groups in Wales, across the country, the picture here is similar to that for the rest of the UK.

Centrally, the work with children and young people is specifically supported by a small team of paid staff, who are part of Quaker Life. In addition there is a team of volunteer trainers across the UK, who are available to provide input to groups of Friends on a range of topics to do with Children and Young people. The paid staff together with volunteers also produce a wide range of resources for use with Children and Young People, such as Journeys in the Spirit, which is free and has been published monthly since 2008.

Area Meetings are asked to support the work with CYP by appointing Friends to a role, which has gone through a number of incarnations, but is currently called 'Advocates for Children and Young People's Work'. The latest wording of the role description is an attempt to clarify it as involving advocacy for the work, rather advocacy directly for children and young people, although clearly the two cannot be wholly separated. Individual Friends appointed by Area Meeting to this role are asked to support and encourage work with CYP in all the constituent LMs, to liaise with others involved in CYP work and to channel information about relevant events and resources to meetings, families and young people throughout the AM. Advocates for CYP work may sometimes participate directly in work with CYP, but are not expected per se to do so. Although clearly advocates need to have an awareness of safeguarding issues, this is also not their primary function: that rests with AM and LM safeguarding co-ordinators.

Work with Children and Young People across Meeting for Friends in Wales

Based on the information available from the Britain Yearly Meeting website (<https://quaker.org.uk/meetings/all>) the following meetings offer a Children's Meeting for Worship, although not all of these will be weekly and precise details are not always up to date.

Abergavenny (MW)
Aberystwyth (MW)
~~Almley Wootton~~ (SM)
Bangor (NW)
Bridgend (SW)
Cardiff (SW)
Hereford (SM)
Lampeter (SW)

Llandrindod Wells (MW)
Llangollen (NW)
Ludlow (SM)
Machynlleth (MW)
Milford Haven (SW)
Penarth (SW)
Ross on Wye (SM)

Swansea (SW)
Wrexham (NW)

In my experience, the absence of a regular Children's Meeting for Worship can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that parents who come to a meeting, which does not make provision for children are unlikely to return and young people who do not find peers in Quaker Meeting are unlikely to continue to attend.

Welcoming children and young people is not just about activities, but more about a genuine culture of celebrating our meetings as all age communities. To bring about such a cultural change, when a meeting has become used to being predominantly composed of adults, takes time and can be uncomfortable.

Each of the Area Meetings in MFW should appoint at least one CYP work advocate. To the best of my knowledge, this is currently the case for North Wales AM, South Wales AM and Southern Marches AM. As with local meetings, it is sometimes the case that an Area Meeting may feel that the need for someone in this role is not there because there are few or no LMs with a regular Children's Meeting in the AM. Again, as with LMs, this makes it less likely that provision for CYP within the AM will grow or be sustained.

To work towards a thriving all age worshipping community, whether at local, area or national level, requires not just support for children and young people who attend, but also for parents and those adults who are actively involved in working with children and young people. The latter group should not be assumed to be synonymous with the former. Often parents (and teachers) are amongst those most in need of Meeting for Worship and a break from their own or other people's children.

Following a review of the CYP work advocates role by Quaker Life, the role of CYP advocate support has been continued in Wales and in Scotland, while it has been laid down in most other parts of BYM. This is one of my roles in relation to CYP work. The purpose is to provide support and advice to all of the CYP work advocates throughout Wales.

The role of Advocates for Children and Young People's work in more detail

The most recent leaflet produced by Quaker Life lists 3 aims for Friends performing this role:

- to advocate for the needs of children, grandchildren, young people and their families within the AM
- to raise awareness of regional and national Quaker events for children and young people, their parents, carers and families
- to support and encourage local meetings (LMs) and those who work with children and young people by providing resources and opportunities for development resources and opportunities for development

These aims may be realised in many different ways, by individuals according to their skills, capacity and particular interests. A suggested list of essential tasks are:

to speak up for children and young people's opportunities at LMs and AMs

- to obtain information about Quaker opportunities for children and young people and share it with AMs, families, young people, and LMs
- to attend and report regularly to AMs about what is available for children and young people in relation to events, training opportunities and resources
- to consider what might be developed with children and young people across the AM
- to work with AM elders with responsibility for children and young people, where applicable
- to work in accordance with the AM's data guidelines if keeping records of names and addresses.

There are various additional tasks suggested in the guidance, that advocates 'may' perform, but these are given as examples not as a prescriptive job description.

The guidance leaflet also identifies specific tasks for the AM in supporting those they appoint:

- to appoint one or two Advocates in the AM
- to inform BYM's CYP Team of the appointment (see over for contact details)
- to consider children and young people's involvement across the AM – don't just leave this to the Advocate
- to appoint Friend/s with an eldership responsibility for children and young people and to support the Advocate
- to enable Advocates to keep records of the names and ages of children and young people and the contact details of parents/carers

- to ensure that accurate records are passed on to succeeding Advocates as per their introduction pack and AM guidelines.

Some suggestions for Nominations Committee to consider

The CYP work advocate role is one that can feel quite lonely and at times invisible to many Friends. The individuals nominated for the role need to be passionate about the work, but also pragmatic and patient. They need to clearly understand that their responsibility is to advocate for work across their Area Meeting, not just within their own LM and to be clear that they are advocating for the work, not doing it all themselves. It may not be ideal to nominate someone who is a parent of a young child as they may be constrained in terms of their ability to travel and visit LMs other than their own. The primary involvement of those nominated will be with other adults working directly with children and young people and with those at LM and AM level with overarching responsibility for the welfare of all those in our meetings e.g. Elders and Overseers. It should be recognised that there has been and probably still remains some confusion about the exact nature of this role and therefore it is essential that those who approach potential nominees are clear about it and that they ensure that those they approach are likewise clear before they allow their name to go forward to AM for appointment. The appointment of two Friends is strongly encouraged and these need not be on the basis of geography. It is arguably more important that they can support and encourage each other in the role than try to have them cover different parts of the area meeting.

Finally, we should remember that all of us have a shared responsibility for the care of children and young people in our meetings and not just in order to ensure the future of the society, but for it to be inclusive and welcoming to Friends of all ages in the present.

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