

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS—Hybrid meetings

During lockdown, many groups decided to continue meeting via Zoom, and found it a very successful way of keeping in touch when face-to-face contact was impossible. As lockdown eased, most groups were only too happy to return to meeting in person again, however there were some people who for various reasons (such as lack of mobility or clinical vulnerability) found this difficult if not impossible.

For us in the Environmental Awareness group, turning our back on these individuals was not an option. So we've spent some time looking at ways to meet both in person and on Zoom – a so-called “hybrid” meeting. After some experimentation, we decided to hold our first hybrid meeting on 3 March. Ten members attended our session in the Council Chamber, with a further seven on Zoom.

The format of our meeting was a 20-25 minute presentation by one of our members using Powerpoint slides, followed by a general discussion to which all members (both in the room and on Zoom) were encouraged to make a contribution. Those present on Zoom were visible and audible to those in the room via a large screen at the end of the room (except during the Powerpoint presentation). A roving web camera and microphone pointed at speakers in the room enabled those on Zoom to see and hear the discussion on their own computer screens at home.

Did it work? Yes, though there were inevitably some teething problems. Those in the room reported that they could see and hear remote participants well most of the time – though there were moments when screens froze or audio signals were inaudible, presumably due to wi-fi or Internet problems. Most of those on Zoom felt that sound and vision from the room were adequate, though some reported that sound levels from the room were too low; most could hear the chairman and presenter OK, but had difficulty with some of the other participants.

However, Internet problems did prevent some remote participants from contributing to the meeting. One couple lost their connection entirely and couldn't get back in; another suffered frequent episodes of sound distortion, which prevented her from following the discussion.

Are we going to try it again? Yes, the great majority of attendees, whether in-room or remote, felt that the meeting had gone well, that they had been properly included, and that they'd be happy to attend more such meetings.

Could other groups follow our example? That's up to them, obviously – but it's worth thinking about if they have members who can't get out easily any more. Could the u3a run general meetings this way? Again, yes, though it would need quit a lot of prior organization – so not something to be undertaken lightly.

If any group leader would like to experiment with hybrid meetings, I and my partners in the EAG would be very happy to help. Just email me on johnpleakins@gmail.com.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS GROUP

Both our December 2021 and January 2022 meetings were devoted to discussions of the outcomes from the Glasgow climate summit (COP26). Individual members of the group volunteered to look in detail at specific issues discussed at COP26, including efforts to limit the use of fossil fuels, methods of adapting to the effects of climate change, and nature's role in keeping levels of greenhouse gases down. They then shared the outcomes from their investigations with the rest of the group, enabling us all to get an insight into the way national governments, big corporations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are addressing (or failing to address) the issues.

Like many independent observers, we were encouraged by the fact that so many of the world's nations were prepared to work together to tackle climate change – but disappointed at the vagueness of so many of the promises made. Yes, we can all do our bit as individuals – but the future of our climate is largely in the hands of national governments and international corporations. So far, their responses have been barely adequate.

In complete contrast, our February meeting featured a presentation from Ann Eakins on ocean currents, showing the paths they take across the globe, explaining what drives them, and how they could be affected by climate change. She described three aspects in detail: the Gulf Stream (known to oceanographers as the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation or AMOC), Pacific current gyres, and El Niño/La Niña. All of these have profound effects on our climate, and can in turn be affected by human activity.

For us in Britain, the most important of these is the Gulf Stream, which brings warm water from the Caribbean, keeping western Europe relatively warm in winter. What would happen if it stopped? We'd be in for some bitterly cold winters. Is it likely to stop? Well, it's stopped before, and it's now slowing down because the Greenland ice cap is melting. Could it stop within our lifetimes? Probably not – but no-one really knows.

Our most recent meeting, in March, featured a presentation and discussion on “a post-waste society”, led by Sylvia Woodhead. When we were young, if anything got damaged or broke down, we'd get it repaired. But increasingly over the last half-century, goods have been made so difficult or expensive to repair that most of us don't bother, and just throw them away. We could reduce the mountain of waste this generates if goods could be simply and easily repaired, or easily recycled when they've reached the end of their lives. Manufacturers are slowly waking up to this, and organizations like iFixit are now producing repair manuals and selling spares for all kinds of consumer goods. Time to dust off that old toolkit and have a go yourself?

If you've read this far, you obviously have an interest in the environment. So why not come along and join in our discussions? Forthcoming topics include soils and the environment and

(a controversial one, this) the environmental effects of keeping pets.

We meet on the first Thursday of each month, normally in the Victoria Hall Council Chamber. For more details contact John Eakins