

# **A Local Group: The First Three Years**

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We (Sarah and Jon) wrote this article as a way of introducing our local group and also offering some ideas and inspiration to anyone who might be thinking of starting a local group.

## ***Our considerations***

When I (Sarah) decided to create a local peer group with a colleague, the structure was one of the first issues we considered. It seemed that some groups were very structured and at the other end of the continuum there were groups with very little structure at all. We felt that there were merits and drawbacks to all the places on the continuum and we had to find a balance that satisfied us the most. In fact as our group evolves we continue to engage in a process to find a healthy balance.

We have listed below some of our considerations during the creation of the group.

### ***The Membership***

From our experience groups range from being '*closed*' through to being '*open to everybody*' – again it appeared to be a continuum. We felt we had to strike a balance between the group being safe (in the sense that there would be psychological holding) and being diverse enough to allow the facilitation of members' personal development.

### ***Venues***

As before, the size, location and facilities of where the group meets are on a continuum, which would determine the venue. However, in our opinion, the most important balance that we had to strike was finding enough space at a price that would encourage people to regularly attend the meetings in a location that allowed the best possible access. This was, for us, a non-trivial task. Other issues that would need to be considered depend upon the type of group. For example, "open" groups would need the ability to expand to allow the (hopefully) organic growth of members (whereas this wouldn't be an issue for closed groups).

### ***The format***

The format of the group, for us, covered aspects like, duration, content, frequency, facilitated or not, experiential and/or themed.

### ***Running the group***

The job(s) of running the group depends upon the structure, size and format of the group as well as external factors. For some groups the external factors may be a determining factor in how the group is run. For example if you have a Community Bank account, you need to elect (once a year in an AGM) a Chair and Treasurer/Secretary (two different people).

### ***Funds and Banking***

Depending upon the type of groups depends upon what funds and banking facilities are required. For example a closed group meeting at someone's house is unlikely to require the same level of funds and banking as an open group that has to hire its facilities.

## ***Group Agreements***

These can be verbal right through to well-written constitutions that define all aspects of the group. Other areas that need clarification include; fees to participate, confidentiality, start and end times etc.

## ***Advertising, publicity and communications***

If the group is a closed group regular publicity is not required. However with an open group publicity is vitally important.

Communications are, in our opinion, the most important aspect. Members, even in a closed group, have to be informed of the times of the next meetings, changes, and any other important issues.

Forms of advertising include (a) free entry in Local Groups pages of PCQ (b) posters and fliers passed on to local counselling agencies & local colleges (c) PCA Events<sup>1</sup> (d) posters in libraries (e) free entry in local newspapers 'What's On' pages (f) promotion by other neighbouring local groups (g) group website.

Some of these we were not aware of when we started the group and we have since discovered. We have added them here to assist anyone thinking of starting a local group or finding their group could be helped by further advertising.

## ***What we did***

### ***The beginning***

Early in 2002 a friend and myself (Sarah) considered starting a local group in West London. We spoke to some members of the BAPCA CG and co-ordinators of other local groups. After much discussion we decided to form a local group based in the London Borough of Hillingdon. Although members who lived and worked outside the borough were also welcome.

The first step was to contact a local bank in order to open a community account. We were surprised to find that in order to open the account, we required the minutes from an AGM to elect a chairperson and treasurer/secretary. As there were only two members, we held our AGM that day and elected each of us to the two required roles, then duly opened the account. At this point BAPCA generously gave us £50 start-up grant/loan. We both felt strongly that we wanted to be able to repay this loan one day.

The next step was to find a suitable venue at a reasonable cost that would be easily accessible to all potential members. We settled on the Friends' Meeting House in the centre of Uxbridge. This was convenient for the tube, buses and parking. Available to us were three sizes of rooms which could hold from 7 to up to 30 people.

We both felt we would like the group to be experiential and open to anyone interested in the person-centred approach. We thought it might good to start with meetings held once a month on a Saturday morning for 2 hours. This was simply a starting point as we were keen for all members to be involved in deciding on the direction of the group.

Our third step was advertising the group. We decided to create a website. Fortunately we only had to pay for the cost of hosting the site and a domain name

([www.hillingdonbapca.co.uk](http://www.hillingdonbapca.co.uk)). We advertised in P2P (now PCQ), put up posters in local libraries and sent out fliers to local counselling agencies.

Six people attended the first meeting. As a group we discussed how we would like the group to run; for example, we decided how much we were willing to pay each time to cover our costs and to build up some funds. We also decided to continue meeting one Saturday a month for 2 hours (apart from Aug and Dec).

### ***The Fight for Survival***

For the first year we struggled to survive with some meetings having only 2 people attend. At the Birmingham AGM in 2003 I spoke to members of other local groups. As a result we decided to try having themed meetings as our feelings were some people did not understand what an experiential group was. We chose to make the first 30 minutes business time, in which all the members present that day decide upon aspects of the group. We then move into exploring our theme. The theme is always a starting point and we see where the process takes us from there. At the end of the meeting we decide upon the theme for the next meeting.

Before our 2nd AGM the Treasurer/Secretary announced she would not be standing. I, Jon, decided to stand for this role. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> AGM we decided to continue with the themed meetings as we enjoyed them and they appeared to generate interest. We also increased the time to 3 hours. Around this time we were able to increase our advertising: Chiltern & Thames BAPCA (our neighbouring local group) kindly promoted us within their own membership and we discovered we could advertise for free in our local paper and on PCA Events<sup>1</sup>. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> year the number of regular attendees increased to 6 to 8. Some members attended every meeting whilst some others dipped in and out.

Participants seemed to enjoy the small group size. However, our funds were small and we were aware that in terms of finance we needed 7 people at every meeting in order to meet the costs of the room hire and providing hot drinks. So I (Sarah) found this knowledge of our financial situation got in the way of me fully enjoying the experience of the group. I found myself wanting a couple of larger meetings just to clear my mind of this concern.

### ***The Past 18 Months***

I (Sarah) attended the Annual Local Groups Meeting in Preston in 2004. At this meeting I heard about the popularity of attendees of local groups receiving CPD certificates. I suggested to our group that we produced some and this has proved popular within our group.

In the past 18 months the number of regular attendees has steadily increased until we now have between 12 and 25 people and as a group we decided to increase the duration of the meeting to 3 and a half hours. We also use the largest room available and have on some occasions decided to split into 2 groups rather than one large group of 25.

Recently we organised a day long experiential meeting for which we limited the number to 15. This was well received by the group and other days have been requested.

We are both so delighted to be part of this group. At times it did feel like hard work to keep it going and we did wonder if it would be successful enough to keep running.

I (Sarah) really appreciate every minute of our meetings and know that they consistently help me in my growth. I am so pleased to have the chance to have these experiential encounters regularly. I want to thank everyone who has been a part of our group for his/her contributions.

From my (Jon) point of view the group has been a wonderful experience. I feel some of my best learning experiences have occurred in the group. I have found the environment very nourishing and would like to thank all people who have participated in the group.

Finally we both want to thank Chiltern and Thames BAPCA for their support and encouragement while our group has been developing.

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### **PCA Events**

This is a Yahoo Group on which you can advertise any person-centred events for free. It is also free for you to join if you want to be kept up to date with person-centred events. You can access it by going to <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/pca-events>. (We haven't forgotten the 'www'). Or you can go to our website [www.hillingdonbapca.co.uk](http://www.hillingdonbapca.co.uk) and click on the Links page. If you scroll down you will see a link to PCA Events. You can click directly on the purple 'Yahoo Groups Join Now' button. If you have any questions about this, you are welcome to contact us on [enquiries@hillingdonbapca.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@hillingdonbapca.co.uk)