

Stockport 2020 Project

Knitting Friends in the Park How Covid-19 has affected our group

My name is Krysia K, I live in Heaton Moor, Stockport, and since August 2011 I've been running a knitting group which met in the pavilion in Heaton Moor Park every Friday, with very few exceptions, until March 2020. Having formed under the umbrella of the Friends of Heaton Moor Park, members of the group raised funds over the years for various improvements in the park and the pavilion building. The knitting group is open to anyone and everyone. Currently, the age range of members is 59 to 85 influenced to a large extent by the timing of our meetings, which take place from 10.00 until 12.00 on a weekday. Even though many men do knit, we have never had any men expressing an interest in attending our meetings. They don't know what they've been missing! Our group is, of necessity, quite small because the room we meet in cannot comfortably accommodate more than 15 knitters - knitting requires a certain amount of elbow room.

Things changed dramatically on 23rd March 2020 when the country was sent into lockdown because of Covid-19. We had already decided that our last meeting in the pavilion would be on Friday 13th March 2020 because the majority of our members were classed as 'vulnerable'.

I was afraid that if we just stopped meeting and did nothing, the group would fold so I decided to make our meetings virtual using Zoom, which seemed to be the most user friendly meeting platform and compatible with most types of device. We had a practice session with four of us on 27th March and then launched into a meeting for the whole group on 3rd April.

Our group's skill levels using technology vary a great deal. We use a variety of devices from sophisticated smart phones, laptops, tablets to landlines and very basic pay as you go mobiles without internet access. After a couple of weeks I decided to upgrade to Zoom's Pro package which has enhanced features and allows participants to dial in by phone. Not as good as seeing people on a screen but better than nothing. This was the only way one of our members was able to join in. Another member was only able to join in by piggy-backing i.e. listening in on a phone placed next to someone's laptop. I think it's very impressive how our ladies, particularly those who felt technologically challenged, managed to participate in the meetings. If proof were needed that age is no barrier to using technology, this is it.

It has to be said that, for various reasons, not all of our members were able or indeed wanted to meet virtually, highlighting the existence of a digital divide. Good health and appropriate technology have made it much easier for people to access and benefit from what has been offered by the local community and groups such as ours, not to mention official bodies.

Our weekly Zoom meetings have been written up on a blog at www.knittingfriends.org.

I started the blog in August 2018, the idea being to record our projects and other information, but it came into its own during Covid. With the onset of lockdown, the blog meant that anyone missing a Zoom meeting could still keep in touch – as long as they were able to access it of course! It would also provide a record of what we got up to for future reference.

For the Stockport2020 Project, I emailed our members and asked for their thoughts about Covid-19. The questions and responses received, are shown below. They show what we were thinking up to the end of August 2020.

Q1 I emailed everyone in our group on 16th March to say our meetings in the park would be suspended for an indefinite period (this was before I had even heard of virtual meetings). How did you feel about the possibility of no meetings for what could be some time?

Catherine D: I just accepted this. The virus had changed everything for my family members who are in work, and for my sister trying to visit grandchildren. I take a keen interest in the World Health Organisation, and I knew from their reports etc that the whole world was disrupted and that this would go on for some time.

Krysia M: I was sad to think that the meetings couldn't take place in the park as although I didn't attend every week, I really enjoyed the chat and the exchange of ideas and experiences, and also of course, the knitting and crochet tips. Although most of us are ladies of a "certain age", the actual age range is quite large and makes for very interesting conversations. I hope face to face meetings return soon, even if we have to book our slots!

Judith: Felt very sad as I really enjoyed the meetings.

Agnes P: I felt quite sad as the weekly knitting meeting is very important to me. It is the only time in the week I feel I get a chance to have some respite from my caring duties and do something for me. It has been a lifeline being able to meet up with fellow knitting enthusiasts who have become important friends. We have a nice chat about all sorts of things, as well as picking up tips and advice on knitting projects. We look after ourselves with tea, coffee, and have been treating ourselves with each other by baking savouries and cakes. Our meetings also contribute towards the upkeep of the park as well as contributing to local charitable projects whichever individual has an interest in. No meeting definitely meant being isolated.

Linda P: I was really saddened by the decision because it has been a feature of my life for over five years. I measure the week by it and it is so much more than just knitting, it's fun and funny and social and friendly. Of course, right at the beginning I thought, like others, that it would all be over in a couple of months, much like swine flu, so although I was sad, I was resigned to it.

Conversely, I was also quite happy that the decision had been taken out of my hands as we were 'semi-shielding' (my husband has health issues and although not one of the vulnerable group, we were both worried about the impact of Covid on him and had taken the decision to isolate as much as possible, which of course meant I would no longer have been able to attend the meetings in person anyway which would have led to FOMO!).

After those initial feelings, I actually became a little anxious and emailed to say I hoped you wouldn't mind me bothering you with frequent emails while the group was closed.

Perveen T: I was quite sad that there would be no meetings for a while as I really enjoyed meeting up for a knit and natter.

Jayne W: I knew I would miss getting out to meet as a group. I felt I was just getting to know you all.

Krysia K: I wanted to make sure that the group kept going. I get a lot out of running the group – a sense of purpose, satisfaction, a feeling that I'm doing something useful, as well as a chance to have a good old chinwag about anything and everything – knitting too on occasion! I didn't want the group to fold as it would leave a fairly substantial hole in my life.

Q2 On 1st April I emailed everyone with a link to our first Zoom meeting to be held on Friday 3rd April. How did you feel about that? Were you worried about using this new technology? Had you used it already with friends or other groups? Did you think it was worth bothering to meet virtually?

Catherine D: I was not proficient in Zoom, but quite willing to have a bash at it. I think it was definitely worth meeting virtually.

Krysia M: I welcomed the invitation to Zoom, having used it to speak to family. I had a few false starts, but generally found it easy to use.

Judith S: My phone could not link up visually to Zoom, but I linked up non-visually.

Agnes P: I was interested in the prospect of a virtual meeting and although I had participated in Face Time, I had never heard of Zoom. I am not a fan of Face time mainly because I don't look good on screen, preferring to see people Face to face, but it can also reinforce the sense of isolation. However, I was willing to give it a try as I did not want to lose touch with such good friends.

Linda P: By April, schools had been closed and staff were starting to meet virtually so my husband, a teacher, was already using Zoom for daily staff meetings and was able to help set me up (his staff trialled many different platforms including Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts but Zoom was definitely the easiest and most user friendly). I was so happy that we were all going to be able to meet again, albeit virtually, although I did worry that the number of people using it would be reduced because of the technology.

(I didn't use it with family and friends as I have an Amazon Alexa so was able to have frequent video calls with family and friends, which was so reassuring during lockdown, particularly being able to SEE my elderly parents when I couldn't visit).

Perveen T: I was very excited about the zoom meetings. I felt it was definitely worth meeting virtually as it would be nice to catch up with everybody. I had not used zoom before but had done 1 to 1 on Skype.

Jayne W: Technology didn't worry me. I had never used Zoom before lockdown but had started to use it to meet the wider family. Yes I did think it was worth doing especially as I felt I had just started to get to know you all.

Krysia K: I was quite nervous when we all met the first time but had already had a successful practice session and had tried it out on my family. I had attended a Zoom meeting once before, as a participant, but being the meeting host was a new experience.

Q3 After our first meeting:- how did you feel about the experience? Did you have problems accessing the meeting? Did you enjoy the experience?

Catherine D: Yes I enjoyed it. The software froze up at times, but mostly was ok.

Krysia M: I enjoy our Zoom meetings, although I think they should be limited to 1hour. Maybe it's just me , but after that I start to get restless!

Judith S: A bit strange as I could only hear and not see the other members, but I 'mentally' sat them around the table and was able to visualise them in that way.

Agnes P: After the first meeting I was quite elated, Krysia talked us through the technology and it was easy to pick up. I thought it was a great idea which would keep the group going.

Linda P: I so enjoyed seeing everyone. I had worried that it would be awkward, but it wasn't. I felt a bit shy at first but you did a sterling job of making sure everyone was involved, showing what they were knitting and what they had been doing.

Perveen T: I really enjoyed our first meeting. It was just lovely to see everyone. I didn't have problems accessing the meeting because Krysia had sent the link making it easy to access.

Jayne W: As with all new experiences it took us a while to get into it. It's not easy to hear anyone when two people talking together. We got there though, didn't we.

Krysia K: I felt the meeting went very well and received some very positive comments from the ladies. I had some concerns about outsiders 'bombing' meetings (read about this online) so was pleased that I'd managed to sort out the Zoom waiting room feature as well as a password before Zoom made this the default for all Zoom meetings. I enjoyed it!

Q4 In general:- How did meeting via Zoom make you feel during lockdown? Did it have an impact on your wellbeing? Did using Zoom encourage you to use the computer and internet more? Do you use Zoom regularly at other times, with other groups? Is meeting virtually as good as meeting in person? Do you get as much out of the virtual meetings as you did when we met in person? Do you think the group would have folded if we hadn't turned to Zoom? Do you enjoy using Zoom or does it make you uncomfortable?

Catherine D: I think there would be major problems with Zoom if it was used for something very important, e.g. a job interview or a crucial meeting with examiners. I think it would be easy to challenge a decision taken as a result of a Zoom meeting. I don't think it can replace meeting in person. I doubt the group would have folded without it, but it would have been impacted.

Krysia M: I think the Zoom meetings have helped the group to keep going, although I don't think it would have folded. It is not the same as meeting in person, but helped to brighten up the day in lockdown. Zoom doesn't make me feel uncomfortable, and although I appreciate the technology of Zoom, texting and Whatsapp etc, it is not the same as personal contact.

Judith S: Even non-visual Zoom was better than nothing at all, as it kept the group together, giving everyone a chance to chat and have a laugh.

Agnes P: It was lovely to see everyone and even Margaret who was on holiday with her children was able to access Zoom. It also meant I got back my time again and helped reduce my isolation. Other people were in a similar position to myself and it helped to talk to each other and we got a chance to listen to each other. The meetings have been fun, still sharing tips and ideas and also learning new things by doing quizzes and other activities. I think I have got more out of the Zoom Meeting than meeting face to face. I felt I got to know the individuals in the group more and feel they have become personal friends and look forward to when we meet up. I don't think the group would have folded but worried that we may have lost some people never having the opportunity to see them again. Zoom meetings have been a journey through lockdown. Zoom Meetings encouraged me to use it with my family again doing quizzes and I have become less shy at seeing myself on screen.

Linda P: I don't think Zoom will ever be as good as meeting in person but as a necessary replacement it is the next best thing. I'm quite shy (I know it doesn't look like it in person!) and I can empathise with people who are quiet during the meetings, but the funny thing is that we all keep on coming so obviously we appreciate the contact. I was very impressed with people who got family members to help them log on – clearly they were keen too.

Perveen T: Meeting via Zoom made me feel really good. It helped my well-being as it made me feel good and I had something to look forward to every week in lockdown.

Jayne W: This is a hard one for me to answer. Yes possibly the group would have folded if not for Zoom and for those who didn't get out at all I am sure it was a massive help, for the company apart from knitting tips!! I enjoy using Zoom. I use it for family, slimming World,

church and knitting group but I feel a bit zoomed out sometimes. We have stopped the weekly family ones as some others felt the same. Personally I joined the group because I needed to make myself get out and switch off from my caring role. I was made very welcome and would have continued to come along if we hadn't had Lockdown. I have found a love for walking and now do that most days. Sometimes on a Friday I haven't joined you because other things have got in the way; doesn't mean I don't enjoy it but maybe it's not as important to me as it was before Lockdown (hope that makes sense). I feel bad saying it because you all welcomed me when I really needed the company.

Krysia K: I felt that our meetings via Zoom gave the group continuity and kept our spirits up. It was fun seeing everyone waving to each other at the start of meetings. I'm not particularly gregarious and am happy with my own company so lockdown wasn't much of a problem for me. It was an inconvenience more than anything else. I am a confident computer user, do many things online and enjoyed the challenge of learning something new. Regarding our meetings, I did feel that the meetings needed some structure otherwise they could become boring. So, every so often we would have some activities such as quizzes and games. At the beginning I was very conscious the conversation needed a leader to keep things going and took this upon myself with the result that at times I probably hogged the conversation a bit. Once I realised this was happening I took more of a back seat. I do enjoy using Zoom and now attend a number of meetings and talks on Zoom but tend not to use the video in these. I'm fine using video with my friends. I've had a few minor issues with my internet connection dropping during some of the Zoom sessions but on the whole it's been fine.

Q5 Did you go out at all during lockdown? If you were able to go out, did you see any knitted rainbows in people's windows? How did it feel to see them? How did it feel to see the other things people were placing in windows?

Catherine D: The lockdown made me feel very depressed for several reasons. A major one was the clear and fatuous inability of the government to tackle it. I went out food shopping and for exercise in the park, and saw some rainbows etc. However, I am deeply cynical about gestures such as these, and clapping for the NHS. I know people mean well and are good hearted, but these activities are a government ploy to distract people from concrete matters, such as the need to pay the NHS more, fund it more and create a more equitable society.

Krysia M: I did go out during lockdown, shopping etc, being sensible, but not taking extreme precautions. Maybe I am a cynic, but I hated all the clapping for the NHS. If it made people feel better, then fine and ok if the children enjoyed it, but it's as though the majority are only now appreciating the NHS after always taking it for granted. There is a lot wrong with it and although many are paid well, most are not. I reckon it's the domestic staff who have the most important jobs and they are paid a pittance. Sorry for the rant, but 45 years working for the NHS gives you a certain perspective. Seeing rainbows in windows obviously created by children is fine, but as for the rest....

Judith S: I went for walks around the block, saw knitted rainbows in windows and lots of teddy bears, it made me smile to see them all. I put teddies in my windows.

Agnes P: I went out during lockdown to walk the dog and to do shopping. I saw rainbows in the window and it felt as if people were more connected. The area I live also put pictures of animals in the window to save Chester Zoo; this also gave a feeling of community spirit.

Linda P: My knitting started to be coronavirus-related. I made a shawl with repeating bobbles, which got more frequent towards the end, replicating like viruses and joked that it was my coronavirus shawl.

I found a pattern of a knitted Covid with eyes and placed them in the window holding little signs saying "WASH YOUR HANDS!" and "KEEP YOUR DISTANCE!" to cheer up essential workers like the postman and delivery people. After posting them up on social media, family and friends started to request them and in all I made a couple of dozen, posting them out to cheer people up. Apparently they made good talking points and a nurse and a doctor friends of mine even put them on display in their clinics to encourage handwashing.

I also knitted a teddy with a mask and put him in the window too (although people did comment that he looked like he was being held hostage). After a while, children started to paint rainbows for their windows and I found another pattern for a knitted rainbow and put that in my window too.

Because no-one was going out, people started to exchange greetings over garden fences and I discovered that a little girl nearby had renamed my cat. I knitted her a lockdown bear with a mask for her to name and put in her window, and left it in her porch as though it had been put there by the cat. She and her mum wrote back to my cat to say that she had named the bear "Victor E Bear" (it was VE Day) and sent me some VE day fudge she had made and a painted hope stone. Funny how people start to make connections with one another when there is a crisis.

Perveen T: I did go food shopping in lockdown and seeing the rainbows and signs in people's windows made me feel proud that so many people cared about each other.

Jayne W: The rainbows were fantastic; I have one in my window. I made a few but fiddly things not for me!!! A friend of mine was crocheting nurses for NHS fundraising, they are amazing; I wish I had patience to do them.

Krysia K: I went out only for essentials and exercise during lockdown. I saw quite a lot of rainbows that children had painted/coloured but no knitted ones. To show solidarity I put a couple of knitted rainbow hearts and a teddy in my own window. It was quite sweet to see the things children had made and I daresay that if I had small children at home I would have done more.

Q6 Meeting face to face might not be possible until 2021. If so, will you want to continue with Zoom meetings in the meantime?

Catherine D: Yes please.

Krysia M: I think the Zoom meetings should continue, as long as you can manage them, of course. Maybe reduce to one every other week?

Judith S: Happy to continue Zoom for however long.

Agnes P: I would want the Zoom Meetings to continue until we are able to meet face to face and I am eternally grateful to Krysia for setting them up in the first instance.

Linda P: Yes of course. I would so miss seeing the others if we had to stop.

Perveen T: I definitely would like to carry on with the zoom meetings every week until we can meet in person.

Jayne W: I am not sure I want to join every week anymore. I am sure some of the ladies welcome the weekly interaction though. If you continue maybe I could join from time to time but not feel bad about letting you down.

Krysia K: I am happy to continue with the Zoom meetings for as long as there are members of our group wanting to meet. I'll give up when I end up being the only one attending a meeting.

Q7 We have had a number of activities during our Zoom meetings:

Craft related quizzes

General quizzes

Corona Island Crafts game

General chat with no specific activity

'What's the point?' quiz game - did this only once and it was the game where there was a Yes and No answer and points for each were awarded by the throw of a die.

Which of these was your favourite and which was your least favourite?

Which would you like to continue with in future meetings although not necessarily every week.

Catherine D: I thought they were all quite fun and had no particular favourite or dislike. Let's continue, why not?

Krysia M: I am not a "quizzzy" or board game type of person, but I actually enjoyed doing them, except maybe the island one.

Judith S: Quizzes were good, also general chat.

Agnes P: I liked all the activities particularly the quizzes, as I learnt something new. The Corona Island gave us something to think about ourselves and able to share with each other. A general chat is always nice as well.

Linda P: Loved the quizzes, both craft related and general. Useful to 'keep up the pace' of meetings when people were a little quiet. Sometimes of course, everyone would be chatting so much there was no time for a quiz, but a very welcome diversion. I think I prefer general question and answer quizzes although a bit of variety never hurts!

Perveen T: What I really like about our Zoom meetings is we have a variety of things going on, sometimes a quiz or two and other times just a general chat. It is all so varied and fun.

Jayne W: I really enjoyed the quizzes but I am not very good at them solo. The chatter around the answers brought out some interesting facts. The Corona Island game pushed me right out of my comfort zone (like ice breakers at work) but I thoroughly enjoyed taking part in it.

Krysia K: I've enjoyed all the activities but can see that not all have been equally popular. The quizzes seem to have gone down well so we'll carry on with these as they're quite easy to source if not so easy to answer correctly. The most interesting and enjoyable quizzes were our 'co-operative' quizzes where we each sourced a question and asked it in turn. It meant that everyone would get at least one answer right and also that I had less preparation to do. But what these quizzes showed most was how varied our interests are, revealing aspects of ourselves that we wouldn't normally have had the opportunity to show.

Q8 Is there anything else about 2020 that you'd like to say?

Catherine D: I think there needs to be radical change in the way world resources are exploited and ravaged. I think the chances of this happening are zero.

Krysia M: 2020 eh? It has been surreal. At times during the worst of the lockdown, I have felt as though I had a part in some apocalyptic film! Obviously plans have been changed - not least those associated with celebrating my 70th birthday. Our granddaughter was born during the worst time, and we have been helping out since, probably illegally, but creating a bubble so to speak. The weather has been fantastic and we have enjoyed the garden and managed to get to Wales and have a wonderful holiday in the Lakes and Scotland. I feel fortunate and thankful that my family are well, although guilty (Catholic guilt) that so many families have lost loved ones, really suffered financially and been stuck in tiny flats with no outside space. The children and the sick elderly have suffered the most. The advice we have been given by the powers that be, has been reactive rather than well thought out by any strategic planning by a panel of scientists and public health experts, and my maybe, too logical, brain has not agreed with all of it.

Judith S: A huge Thank You to Krysia for organizing it all, keeping the group in touch with each other.

Linda P: Roll on 2021 and a vaccine so we can get back to meeting in the park – I miss Christine's cakes!

Perveen T: I would like to say a massive thanks to Krysia for setting up the Zoom meetings and finding quizzes and games for us to do.

Jayne W: That I was welcomed by the group when I most needed it and that I have enjoyed getting to know the ladies more when we have been on Zoom. I have appreciated the tips I have picked up. I think I would have enjoyed joining in group projects, you spoke about maybe the Christmas tree and I know you have done blankets in the past.

Krysia K: 2020 has been, to use the most popular word of the year, unprecedented in every respect. We are now in September and I can't see that our group will be meeting in person again this year. The room will be too small to accommodate us if we need to maintain distancing and, even if we wanted to, it will soon be too cold to meet outdoors. I hope that we manage to keep the group going virtually and that 2021 will be kinder to us and to our loved ones.

There is a distinct possibility that restrictions will continue until the end of the year. It will be interesting to see how members of the group feel in another 6 months.