Hi,

We have been announcing this event at our meetings in the Highlands & Islands Group of NA and other applicable places including our Group News webpage <https://www.higna.org.uk/group-news/> since we first became aware of it in the NAWS News publication from June 2019 and believe that many of our members plan to attend.

NAWS have asked a series of questions below to which the simplest answer would be that for the most part the well-established online meetings handle those challenges in much the same was as all other regular meetings do, in autonomy and in line with our traditions.

* What is working best?
* How do online meetings handle contributions?
* How do online meetings handle literature?
* How do they interface with the existing NA community?

However one suspects that some more detail may be useful to help dispel the apparent confusion and misunderstandings that abound in the fellowship around the online meetings.

Much of that confusion and misunderstanding incidentally stems from the caveat NAWS continues to display on the na.org meetings finder which states *“NA World Services does not register online groups, but we list online meetings as a service. This listing does not mean that online meetings are considered NA groups or a part of the NA Service Structure.”(* *<https://www.na.org/meetingsearch/>)*

It is our belief and conscience at Highlands & Islands Group of NA (HIGNA) that unless or until that caveat is either amended or removed that those confusions and misunderstandings will inevitably continue to muddy the waters of the wider discussion about the status of Virtual meetings within the fellowship and that it is the NAWS stated position above which really needs to be addressed prior to any real or meaningful dialogue taking place.

Notwithstanding any of that and in order to establish a base line for any discussion about the online meetings here are a couple of applicable quotes from our literature:

*“Every group has a niche to fill, both in the fellowship as a whole*

*and in the local NA community. As a fellowship, our ability to reach*

*still-using addicts is tied to our willingness to offer meetings that are*

*accessible and attractive to those addicts. With the creative freedom*

*offered by autonomy, we are encouraged to seek the particular*

*role that meets the needs of both the NA community and our own*

*group. We are free to make each group the very best it can be. The*

*vitality of Narcotics Anonymous is enhanced by each group’s willingness*

*to find its niche and fill it.*

*Creative freedom challenges the groups to be strong and responsible.*

*Members may support many meetings with their attendance,*

*but most make a commitment to support one group in particular.*

*Members grow in their personal recovery when they take responsibility*

*for their lives. In the same way, groups grow and become stronger*

*when their members take collective responsibility for maintaining*

*their meetings. Groups reflect the responsibility and commitment of*

*their members.”*

 *IWH&W: Tradition 4, pg. 112.)*

The next quote would be from the literature defining what the basic criteria for an NA group are.

*“What is an NA group?*

*When two or more addicts come together to help each other stay clean, they may form a*

*Narcotics Anonymous group. Here are six points based on our traditions which describe an*

*NA group:*

*1. All members of a group are drug addicts, and all drug addicts are eligible for*

*membership.*

*2. As a group, they are self-supporting.*

*3. As a group, their single goal is to help drug addicts recover through application of the*

*Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous.*

*4. As a group, they have no affiliation outside Narcotics Anonymous.*

*5. As a group, they express no opinion on outside issues.*

*6. As a group, their public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion.*

*In stating the six points that differentiate an NA group from other kinds of groups, we place*

*greater emphasis on drug addiction than almost anywhere else in our service literature. This is*

*because Narcotics Anonymous groups cannot be all things to all people and still provide the*

*initial identification drug addicts need to find their way to recovery. By clarifying our groups’*

*sole membership requirement and primary purpose in this way, once and for all, we free*

*ourselves to focus on freedom from the disease of addiction in the bulk of our service literature,*

*certain that our groups are providing adequate grounds for identification to those seeking*

*recovery”*

(*The Group Booklet)*

The above are both important when considering the issues highlighted below...

**”What is working best”**

As with all regular groups and meetings in NA who meet the basic criteria, as laid out above and which define what an NA group is, there are always going to be subtle differences in the shape and form of how those groups choose to exercise their own creative freedom to carry the message. The online meetings then are no different, so what works best for one meeting may not work for another, particularly in the spirit of the “Common interest” & “Creative freedom” described in Tradition 4. Overall many online meetings have found that by using those basic criteria as a baseline that the vast majority of them function and function well with respect to and within all the Traditions.

In terms of the various alternative technologies what works best it is again a matter for the creative freedom of each group or meeting and whether they choose to simply use text only, audio only or both audio and video, there are pros and cons for all of them. Those meetings who do use video mostly announce that showing your face, so to speak, is a matter of personal choice and that members making the choice to attend in audio only are welcome.

There are a variety of Platforms being used for Online meetings *(the platform being the equivalent of the venue or meeting place in F2F meetings)* The most commonly used platforms being SKYPE, Zoom and most recently Bluejeans although there are others such as Go To Meetings and social media is also being utilized to bring meetings to members. Again there are pros and cons to all of those in terms of suitability, anonymity, usability and cost.

Service and encouraging members to participate in it for the online meetings has and continues to be the same kind of challenge that all NA groups and service bodies face. Determining what is working best to encourage online service is again very much something that each meeting or group and or the service bodies created to serve them have to decide for themselves. As more online groups coalesce and start creating or becoming part of service bodies the opportunities to be of service in different ways will inevitably increase.

Where many online meetings do vary from those who meet f2f would be in the kinds of service opportunities available. For instance the position of tea person is obviously redundant and, as we have no physical literature tables in the traditional sense, so is the position of literature person. In pretty much all other areas the available service positions are exactly as suggested in the Group Booklet and the Guide to local services.

There are however service positions that are unique to the online meetings such as the positions of meeting host or moderator, who is responsible for operating the controls of the platform itself and facilitating such things as microphone and or video muting where applicable, and readings poster, the latter being the person who posts the various readings and announcements that either the meeting chair or other members might read out at various stages throughout the meeting depending of format and whether the meeting decide to create that particular post or not.

In conclusion to this question it is perhaps important to again reiterate that what works best for f2f meetings is largely also what works best for online meetings and that in reality there is no difference between the two other than the manner and choice of venues in which they meet.

The next small section quoted from our literature informs our conscience and underpins our autonomy at HIGNA to some degree with particular respect to the next two questions:

*“Many of us think of the Seventh Tradition as the money tradition.*

*While we have come to associate this tradition of self-support*

*with the funds we contribute, the spirit of the Seventh Tradition goes*

*much farther than that. Whatever a group needs to fulfill its primary*

*purpose should be provided by the group itself.” (IWH&Y Tradition 7 pg. 129)*

**“How do online meetings handle contributions?”**

Traditions 4 & 7 were fundamental considerations in the formation of the Highlands & Islands Group in November of 2011. Of the four original members three of us had been doing service to regionally sponsored Outreach meetings, whereby there had been no demonstrable autonomy, no willingness at that time to move those meetings to a point of self-support, were answerable to the RSC via a website sub-committee and were not asked for nor carried a conscience from their members.

As such then we felt it important right at the beginning to establish a clear policy and method for the collection, safekeeping and distribution of Tradition 7 contributions. We set up a group bank account, following the suggested guidelines of having a treasurer and multiple signatories, and also opened a PayPal account as an alternative method for our growing global membership wishing to contribute to do so. Both of those contribution routes were then made available via our group’s website and we make regular announcements in our meetings to inform our members of their existence.

Logistically as the number of meetings increased and given the diversity and global nature of our membership base it became clear that in order to keep things simple then continuing to use a centralised Tradition 7 pot was the most practical method of managing those contributions. The alternative would have been each meeting requiring its own bank account and or PayPal account.

The online meetings in the HIGNA group handle no cash, as such, and given our fellowships history of the misappropriation of funds over the years that is a distinct advantage over most face to Face meetings or indeed service bodies.

Initially HIGNA’s need for funds was minimal; we used a free Skype account for the first year or so together with free hosting for our groups website and the level of contributions reflected that need and the needs of the small number of members attending that one first meeting. Within a relatively short time that meeting became first two then three and four, nearly 8 years later we now have ten meetings a week within the HIGNA group of meetings.

Consequently as the number of meetings in the HIGNA group increased and the membership grew, both in size and reach, so did the contributions. At the point when we had built up a large enough prudent reserve we were able to begin to look at developing our online services further. We did that by moving from the free Skype account to a paid for service with a dedicated phone number and call package enabling us to provide a “free to the member” call back service to a large number of countries in Europe and North America. As those contributions again increased as a result of that change we were able to afford and add a further call package that enabled us to reach even more addicts pretty much across the world and on six continents. That total package was costing us over £700 per year.

In late 2018 and looking for both a more prudent and usable platform we moved to Bluejeans which has saved us close to £500 per year. Currently the total annual fixed costs for us to have the unique Bluejeans rooms for each of the 8 meetings that use them and our move to a premium, paid for, web hosting account is £207. This equates to an equivalent room rental cost of approximately £0.49p ($0.50c) a week per meeting, the more meetings the cheaper that gets.

In respect of the conscience of HIGNA as to what we do with the surplus funds we have accumulated over and above our prudent reserves that has been an evolving process that we continue to address. At one point early on we were loosely affiliated with an ASC on the West Coast of Scotland to whom we sent reports, made a number of contributions and were listed on their locally printed meetings lists. Two of those contributions made via cheque were ignored, not cashed and eventually timed out despite our several communications to that ASC to determine their fate.

Currently the HIGNA conscience is that we are disinclined to pass down any contributions to a service structure that continues to state that of which we are not a recognised part of.

**How do online meetings handle literature?**

The simple answer to this question is that largely speaking the online meetings don’t “handle” literature at all given that we have no demonstrable need for, nor mechanisms by which it would be practicable to store or redistribute literature in a physical sense. For obvious reasons the vast majority of online meetings have no literature tables in the same way that we have no tea or coffee tables, nor need to populate the service positions traditionally associated with them. Perhaps the only exception to that would be what we have come to term as “hybrid” meetings that are most often hosted by f2f meetings to allow members in isolated communities to attend virtually.

We at HIGNA cannot of course speak for other online meetings but our practice is to offer digital copies of the approved literature that we have to those members of our meetings who are unable to acquire them in any other way. However it feels important to point out that in the several years we have been offering that service probably less than a dozen members across the world have ever asked. Most of our members will purchase their own hard copies of literature when they are able to. We also make available on the HIGNA website links to na.org and the resources that are available for download there such as the IP’s, Booklets, Service Materials, Bulletins and publications like the NAWS News etc.

In the case of HIGNA, which is largely UK based, we also clearly provide links on the front page of our website to the UKNA, UKSO and NAWS websites as being sources of information and of NA literature in both English and other languages respectively.

**How do they interface with the existing NA community?**

Bit of a third person question this that personally, as a member of the “online NA community”, leaves me feeling a bit like the adult child in the corner of the room being discussed by the older dissenting grown-ups….but hey, that’s just my stuff, right!

It does feel important in response to this question though to reiterate that our fellowships adoption of the internet to gather on a regular basis for the purpose of carrying and sharing the message of recovery is not a new phenomenon. The earliest known example of which seems to have been the IRC (Internet Relay Chat) meetings that NA members were using in the mid to late 90’s….which, as can be seen, was well over two decades ago. It is to be assumed that it is these early online meetings which are referenced in the last paragraph of Chapter 10 of the PR handbook:

*“Some* ***online NA meetings*** *are held in chat rooms and some are held through email*

*lists. Again, member anonymity needs to be preserved through a sign-up process or*

*some other protocol. It is important to remember that online NA meetings may come*

*into the view of the public and have the potential to affect the public’s perception of*

*NA. One of the pitfalls of an online meeting can be overly casual conversation that*

*doesn’t seem to be driven by NA’s primary purpose.” P/R H/B pg 96\**

*\*(The PR Handbook as well as other NA service material and IP’s, including for instance IP 21, The Loner, are all in dire need of updating to more accurately reflect the fellowships current use of technology some 20 + years on from their original publication.)*

The wider discussion of much of what is said in that chapter and the quote above is perhaps for another time and place however it is fair to say that the online meeting have come a long way in those last 20+ years, both in terms of their adherence to the Traditions and the way in which many now function in the same was as any other regular meetings of Narcotics Anonymous do and as defined in our literature.

By functioning within and meeting those defined parameters of what an NA meeting is the online meetings are here and are here to stay and, as such, seek nor require permission from further down the service structure to continue to fulfil their primary purpose of carrying the NA message of recovery to those many addicts around the world who choose to attend them.

Perhaps then “How does the NA community interface with the online meetings?” would be a far better question to ask in terms of understanding their place in the fellowship. The response to which has no single or definitive answer because the vast majority of members, quite righty, seem to have no opinion either way but generally accept the online meetings as just another valuable resource for recovery.

It is of note that while some Areas and Regions seem more than willing to list online meetings and a significant number have also accepted and utilise online meetings as an outreach or fellowship development resource, many do not.

Where this relationship has become problematic is further down the service chain where opinion is clearly polarised as to the status of the online meetings within the service structure of Narcotics Anonymous as a whole. This polarisation is mostly around the confusion and conflict created by the NAWS statement that the online meetings are not currently considered, by them, to be regular meetings or part of the service structure of NA. This has led to at least four known instances whereby, and as a direct result of their group’s spiritual consciences, online Area service bodies, after announcing their desire to become seated at Regions, have been turned away on the back of that statement.

*“In Narcotics Anonymous, we rely on a loving God as He expresses*

*Himself in our group conscience, rather than on personal*

*opinion or ego. By working the steps, we learn to depend on a*

*Power greater than ourselves, and to use this Power for our group*

*purposes. We must be constantly on guard that our decisions are*

*truly an expression of God’s will. There is often a vast difference*

*between group conscience and group opinion, as dictated by*

*powerful personalities or popularity. Some of our most painful*

*growing experiences have come as a result of decisions made in*

*the name of group conscience.* ***True spiritual principles are never***

***in conflict; they complement each other.*** *The spiritual conscience*

*of a group will never contradict any of our Traditions.“*

*(BT 6TH ed. PDF Ch.5 Tradition 2 pg.54)*

One only has to listen to the deep gratitude as expressed by countless individual members of what the existence of the online meetings means to them and that how without them many would simply not have made it, to know that the existence of the online meetings is truly an expression of God’s will. That much of the confusion and conflict as exits among the fellowship concerning the status of the online meetings stems from that NAWS statement suggests that it may well not be a spiritually motivated one.

In conclusion and as a member with over 10 years of service experience of both being involved with, taken part in the growth of and actually starting online meetings I have done my best, based on that experience and understanding of some of the challenges, to address, in part, the questions being posed by NAWS here. I would again reiterate that unless or until the status of the online meeting within the service structure is more clearly defined and any barriers to that status removed that we remain, effectively, an outside issue so any discussion as to detail is largely moot at this point. It also feels important to repeat the question of why instead of so uniquely putting those barriers in the way of our meetings becoming a “part of”, having workshops, convening committees and forming Ad-Hocs etc. that the NA community at large and in particular our World Services are not simply asking “How can we help”

ILF&S

Steve A (A T/S of the Highlands & Islands Group of NA Area Service Committee)