

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) Hertford and Hitchin Area Meeting

Annual Report 2023

Headings:	Page:
Structure and objectives of the Area Meeting	2
Public benefit statement	3
Governance	4
Activities	6
Achievement and performance	7
Membership and meetings for worship	7
Children and young people	7
Pastoral and spiritual life of the community	7
Outreach to other communities	8
Use of meeting houses by the community (including Peace Cottage Community Hub)	8
Sustainability	9
Quaker witness	10
Financial governance	11
Trustees	11
Financial Review 2023	12
Key plans for the future	14

Structure and objectives of the Area Meeting

1. This annual report has been compiled by the trustees of the Hertford and Hitchin Area Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), abbreviated as Hertford and Hitchin Area Meeting . The Area Meeting is also known as Hertford and Hitchin Quakers, and was previously known as Hertford and Hitchin Monthly Meeting.

The Area Meeting is part of the organisation of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, and the national body is known as Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM). The Area Meeting contains six local meetings (LMs), which hold public meetings for Worship and have day-to-day care of Meeting Houses and other property.

The objective of the Area Meeting is the furtherance of the general religious and charitable purposes of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain in the area of the Area Meeting and beyond. This may be done by work such as:

- strengthening the life and witness of Quaker meetings in the local communities they serve, and sharing Quaker values and principles through outreach;
- interpreting and developing the thought and practice of the Religious Society;
- undertaking Quaker service for the relief of suffering at home and abroad;
- funding the concerns that the Area Meeting has adopted or agreed to support;
- providing for the pastoral care of individual Members and Attenders¹ including assistance to those in need, and for education;
- maintaining and developing its Quaker meeting houses as places for public worship and from which to carry our witness into the world;
- administering and maintaining the organisation of the Area Meeting and contributing to the support of Britain Yearly Meeting

2. This report covers the calendar and financial year ended 31st December 2023.
3. The Area Meeting was registered with the Charity Commission on 29th September 2009 with Registered Charity Number 1131894.
4. Address that can be used for communication with the Clerk to the Trustees:
Clare Cooper, 11 Eleanor Road, Hertford, SG4 3DN
5. Trustees:

The following Trustees served in 2023:

Clare Cooper
David Hindle
Nick Needham
Phil Rowe

¹ “Members” are those who have formally been accepted into membership of the Area Meeting, “Attenders” are those who regularly attend Meeting for Worship but are not Members. The Area Meeting has a general policy of not distinguishing between Members and Attenders.

6. Key officers

- Area Meeting Clerk for Meeting for Worship for Business (held six times annually)
- Assistant Area Meeting Clerk

These roles are rotated between Clerks and Members/Attendees of constituent local meetings. A Continuity Clerk (Kathy Hindle) was appointed to maintain the flow of information to and between constituent local meetings.

- Area Meeting Treasurer David Hindle
- Safeguarding Coordinator Clare Cooper

Names and addresses of other relevant organisations or persons:

Bank: Triodos Bank, Deanery Road, Bristol, BS1 5AS

Examiner of Accounts: John Presland

Custodian Trustees for the Area Meeting:
Friends Trusts Limited, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ

Serious Incidents.

There were no serious incidents in 2023 which should have been reported.

Public Benefit Statement

1. The principal public benefit of the Area Meeting is that in normal circumstances, at least weekly each of the 5 Meeting Houses in current use is open to the public for Meeting for Worship. The Meeting Houses are also made available as appropriate, sometimes at a subsidised charge, to suitable local community and interest groups and charities.
2. The Area Meeting and its constituent local meetings provide financial support to Quaker activities in the UK and abroad, mostly through contributions to national Quaker organisations. Support is also provided to a number of organisations and projects which are in broad agreement with Quaker principles, including peace, justice, and welfare.

Governance

1. The Area Meeting in session adopted a Governing Document on 13 October 2007 (Minute 81/07), amended on 9 November 2008 (Minute 81/08). As a result of meetings for worship being held online due to Covid, a further amendment was made to incorporate this change (Minute 22/23)
2. The activities of the trustees are defined by the Governing Document, and by the Terms of Reference for trustees adopted by the Area Meeting business meeting on 9 June 2007. The minutes of trustees' meetings, and supporting documents, are available (currently passworded) on the internet, and the attention of existing and new trustees is drawn to this and other significant information sources on the internet.
3. Meetings for church affairs, in which the Religious Society conducts its business, are meetings for worship based on silence, carrying the expectation that God's guidance can be discerned if members are truly listening together and to each other. The unity that is sought depends on the willingness of all to seek the truth in each other's utterances. There is no voting in any meeting as this would inhibit the process of seeking to know the will of God as expressed in the sense of the meeting.

The Clerk of the meeting bears the final responsibility for preparing the business, conducting the meeting and drafting the minutes of the meeting. Minutes are drafted by the Clerk during the course of the meeting, but the final decision about whether the minute represents the sense of the meeting is the responsibility of the meeting itself, not of the Clerk.

4. The Area Meeting during 2023 had 6 constituent geographically based local meetings which organise public Meetings for Worship. These local meetings are at:

 Guilden Morden Meeting (at Eyeworth)
 Letchworth
 Hertford
 Hitchin
 Stevenage
 Welwyn Garden City (WGC).

The Local Meeting at Hoddesdon was laid down at the start of 2012; the Area Meeting continues to oversee the building and plans for its use are progressing. Occasional Meetings for Worship and other events are held there.

5. All of these local meetings are authorised to hold bank accounts, and each (except Guilden Morden) has the use of a Meeting House, as its place of worship. These are owned by the Area Meeting. Three of the local meetings also accommodate wardens, and WGC also has a small building used as a function room.

Friends Trusts Ltd is the custodian trustee of the Area Meeting's properties.

A number of advisory and executive functions are delegated to subsidiary committees:

- the Finance Committee assists the Area Meeting Treasurer in recommending financial policy and overseeing the financial affairs of the Area and local meetings.
- the Properties Committee oversees the care of properties, mainly by receiving properties reports from each local meeting, and reporting annually to Area Meeting.

- the Camp Committee organises an annual residential camp on behalf of Grand Union Quaker Camps, a registered charity, for Members and Attenders of the Area Meeting and some others; the Camp Committee is authorised to hold a bank account.

The Area Meeting is part of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, of which Britain Yearly Meeting is the body which centrally manages the policy, property, employment and work of the Religious Society.

6. Risk assessment: the Trustees have considered a number of areas of possible risk, as follows:

Care of property:

The properties are appropriately insured, and Area Meeting Properties Committee has oversight of any significant alterations to property which local meetings propose and provide advice as needed on proposals, and receives annual reports on the condition of the Meeting Houses and other properties.

Health and Safety:

The local meetings are responsible for assessing the safety aspects of the use of the buildings in their care or which they use. The Trustees will incorporate oversight of this into Memoranda of Understanding.

Financial probity:

The Area Meeting and its constituent bodies have no activities which constitute a major financial risk. There is a financial reporting system which includes independent examination of the Area Meeting and its constituent bodies' annual accounts.

Investments:

The Area Meeting's funds are all in bank accounts and building societies. The placement of the funds is reviewed periodically.

Employment:

The Trustees have examined the employment practices in the local meetings with regard to legal requirements.

Safeguarding

Our Safeguarding policy and practice was revised in 2022 in light of new guidance from British Yearly Meeting working with the Christian safeguarding charity Thirtyone:eight. This was reviewed again in September 2023. It is the responsibility of all Friends and Attenders to abide by the Safeguarding policy for everyone who comes to our Meeting Houses or premises. Where needed, Friends or Attenders volunteering with children attended Safeguarding training, usually paid for by the local meeting.

Activities

1. The main activity of the constituent local meetings is the holding of public meetings for worship using Quaker practice, and regular meetings for church affairs. The Area Meeting itself holds business meetings for church affairs and supports its constituent local meetings, including providing grants and practical support to develop the life of meetings, and of individual Quakers (Members) and attenders.
2. In general, membership continues to age and decline in numbers, although most local meetings regularly receive new visitors and enquirers who have heard about Quakers and want to know more. Some of these enquirers return, and some decide to become Quakers. Overall however, there are fewer people available to take on administrative roles within the local and area meetings due to age or other work/life commitments. At the local meeting level, some of these functions are managed by Business Meetings. At the Area Meeting level, administrative functions have been shared amongst different local meetings.
3. Other activities include:
 - Fostering relations with Britain Yearly Meeting and other Quaker Area Meetings (such as through online forums and meetings), and with other denominations and faiths;
 - Promoting our Quaker way of life, values, beliefs and practices;
 - Witness through action, engaging in work to support peace initiatives and resettling and befriending of refugees, often in partnership with other organisations.
4. The Area Meeting and its constituent local meetings decide how to use their funds to support Britain Yearly Meeting and other Quaker bodies, and support individuals and non-Quaker organisations whose objects and actions are in accordance with core Quaker values, including peace, simplicity, truth, justice, and equality.

Achievements and Performance

1. Membership and Meetings for Worship

At the end of 2023, for Tabular Statement purposes, there were 111 Members of the Area Meeting, 5 fewer than the previous year, and 137 attenders. The Area Meeting lost 2 Members by death, 3 by transfer out and 2 by resignation. We also welcomed 1 new member by conviction and 1 by transfer in.

Meetings for Worship were held every Sunday in all local meetings, except Guilden Morden which meets twice monthly. Hitchin Meeting held a second half-hour online Meeting for Worship on Wednesday evenings, and Welwyn Garden City Meeting held two meetings for worship on Sunday mornings. Some Meetings continued to make use of digitally 'blended' Meetings for Worship with the use of a laptop allowing the participation of those who were unable to attend in person, or who lived or moved further away, or abroad. Average attendance reduced from 2022, varying from three to five at Stevenage and Guilden Morden, and 10-15 at Hitchin, Hertford and Letchworth. Attendance at the earlier Meeting for Worship at Welwyn Garden City attracted between 4 and 10 people, and up to 25 at the later meeting.

Six Area Meetings for Business were held in person. Average attendance was around 9 apart from the Business Meeting at Welwyn Garden City when extra all-age activities were arranged, which encouraged 15 Friends to attend. Reports were received regularly from Meeting for Sufferings (the national standing executive body between Yearly Meetings) and the various committees accountable to Area Meeting. A triennial report was received from Guilden Morden Meeting. Area Meeting dates for 2024 were agreed, and the tabular statement (an indicator of the numerical strength of our local meetings) for 2022 was received, the Area Meeting being the body responsible for membership.

2. Children and Young People

Three of the six local meetings held regular activities for children. At Letchworth two children regularly attended with their parents, and in addition an All-Age Meeting was held around four times a year followed by a shared lunch. Children's Meetings, play or garden-based, were held monthly in Hitchin Meeting where there were three children under five who attended. These were also followed by a shared lunch for the families to enjoy. In Hitchin there were additional online Zoom meetings with children in Israel and Canada but these ceased. In Welwyn Garden City, between 2 and 10 children joined the monthly Children's Meetings, for play, stories and circle time. Hertford had no children attending regularly but two All-Age Meetings were held in May and December, which a few young people were able to join.

3. Pastoral and spiritual life of the community

Meetings around six times a year allowed Elders and Pastoral Carers to share information and consider ways to reach out to other Friends and Attenders with vulnerabilities, and plan activities to strengthen their Quaker community. Difficulty filling these roles due to smaller numbers attending regularly, meant that some local meetings continued to share these functions and work collaboratively (for example at Hertford and Hitchin). Elderly Friends and Attenders who had difficulty attending Meeting for Worship were supported through visits and phonecalls, and taxis arranged at times to bring them to the Meeting.

Meetings for Worship included 'Afterthought' sessions and readings from Advices and Queries. Clerks used email or digital messaging groups to share information and requests with Friends and Attenders in their meetings, and 'Inspirations' submitted by Friends such as short readings, photographs or artwork. Hitchin continued to produce their monthly newsletter of 6 articles (Quakerview) which was sent to all other local meetings and to Friends who had moved away from the area.

Hitchin, Welwyn Garden City and Letchworth Meetings held monthly social events to allow Friends to get to know each other better and to provide opportunities for spiritual reflection, such as shared lunches, discussion or book groups, craft mornings, monthly walks and speakers. Some of these events took place at the Meeting House or in Friends' homes. A Hertford Friend arranged a winter Area Meeting group visit to Bayfordbury Observatory, creating an opportunity to meet together socially and enjoy the night sky.

A Friend from Welwyn Garden City Meeting hosted community afternoon tea parties with slide shows. Welwyn Garden City Meeting also held a games afternoon for young and old Friends to learn new or old games. A small group of Friends at Welwyn Garden City Meeting arranged a series of 'Wild Prayer' meetings over the year, inviting Friends and Attenders from other local meetings to explore alternative ways of developing their spiritual life.

Online forums for role holders (trustees, safeguarding representatives, clerks, elders and pastoral carers, treasurers) run by Britain Yearly Meeting were a valuable source of learning and support to many individuals across local meetings. The Woodbrooke centre continued to provide online learning opportunities for Friends and Attenders, many of whom also joined workshops and talks online during the Britain Yearly Meeting annual meeting. Welwyn Garden City Meeting supported two of its members financially to pursue studies in Talking Peace and in Christian Spirituality.

4. Outreach to other communities

Local meetings continued to connect with local faith groups, including Churches Together and Interfaith Fora. In Welwyn Garden City Meeting, a Friend gave talks at their Interfaith group meeting and read from Quaker Faith and Practice at a public Peace gathering. Hitchin Meeting focussed on completing their Peace Garden, organising a peace walking meditation in readiness for the UN International Day of Peace, which attracted 20 people from the local community. They took part in a preaching exchange to mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Friends from Hertford attended the World Day of Prayer service at the Catholic Church and took part in the Churches Together Walk of Witness at Easter. Hitchin, Hertford and Letchworth opened their Meeting Houses to the public for the Bedfordshire Bike 'n Hike day and/or UK Heritage Day in September, attracting many local visitors from their communities. Hertford also held monthly open mornings during the summer months for local people to be able to visit the Grade 1 listed building and ask about Quaker life and activity. Guilden Morden Meeting has, with the support of other local churches, organised occasional sessions entitled "Exploring Silence".

5. Use of meeting houses by the community

All the local meetings except Guilden Morden have Meeting Houses and other facilities which are well used by groups in the wider community. The availability of these premises is regarded as a form of service to the community, particularly when they are used by groups providing a social, health, faith or educational support function. Hiring rates were adjusted following the rise in energy prices in 2022, but these are maintained at an

affordable level for groups that may struggle financially. The hiring of these premises was a significant source of revenue for local meetings.

Hirers across the Area Meeting include:

- Group training for counsellors
- Mental health support groups
- Buddhist meditation
- Alcoholics Anonymous
- Days for Girls (provides education and menstruation products for women and girls)
- Carers' support group
- Climate café
- Gamblers Anonymous
- Spiritualist group
- Islamic Cultural (Friday prayers)
- Children's play and music groups
- Yoga and Tai Chi
- U3A groups
- Bridge club
- Music clubs/concerts
- Dance groups

Friends and Attenders at local meetings continued to work to maintain their premises in good condition and improve them for the communities they serve, carrying out annual premises checks, repairs, servicing of equipment and annual 'deep' spring cleaning. Letchworth Meeting undertook asbestos removal from the Meeting House making this a safer environment for users. At Hitchin Meeting House, challenging work continued to install a lift to increase accessibility, despite ongoing technical difficulties. Hertford Meeting was able to employ a team from the prison service Community Payback scheme to carry out external woodwork decoration.

Peace Cottage Community Hub (formerly Hoddesdon Quaker Meeting House)

While no longer an active Quaker Meeting, Peace Cottage continued to develop as a community hub, with the support of a steering group of members from Welwyn Garden City, Hertford, and Guilden Morden Meetings, and a dedicated team of garden volunteers from the Hoddesdon area. A prison service Community Payback team carried out garden weed clearance and grass cutting in the burial ground, and local volunteers continue to develop the garden. A number of events intended to draw in the local community have been organised, including community forums to discuss the future of the Hub, a local history talk, explorations of sustainability and wellbeing, "coffee and craft" sessions during the school summer holidays, and performances by a drama group. A grant of £15,000 from a Britain Yearly Meeting fund was used to improve roofing and electrical installations.

6. Sustainability

Local meetings continued to seek ways to fulfil our commitment to the policy of sustainability being pursued by Britain Yearly Meeting. We were mindful in limiting or reducing our energy consumption (such as using water-saving taps and lights in Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City) and bought this from renewable sources. All local meetings continued to encourage wildlife through the maintenance of ponds and/or wild life areas in their

gardens. Hertford Meeting regularly hosted the Climate Café and was a venue for Hertford Town Council showing films to the public on environmental issues.

7. Quaker witness

Hertford and Hitchin Area Meeting has sought in various and imaginative ways to uphold the testimonies of British Quakers of truth, simplicity, peace, sustainability and equality in their witness to the community. Hitchin Meeting organised a peace walking meditation in readiness for the UN International Day of Peace, which attracted many local visitors to their Peace Garden. They took part in a preaching exchange to mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Friends from Hertford attended the World Day of Prayer service at the Catholic Church and took part in the Churches Together Walk of Witness at Easter. Welwyn Garden City Friends invited other faith communities and the public to join them in a day of Prayer for the Earth in the town centre, gathering in prayerful stillness for a Meeting for Worship, and afterwards with prayers, song and dance. In Hertford, a 30 minute vigil was held each Friday at the Meeting House for peace in the Middle East conflict.

Letchworth, Hertford and Hitchin Meetings ran educational sessions to school groups or local history groups, on Quaker history, and artwork and posters were displayed on the building exteriors to demonstrate Quaker values and invite interest to passers-by.

Financial support for Quaker organisations in 2023 amounted to about £18,200, for non-Quaker organisations about £6,000.

Individual meetings raised money through events such as a clothes exchange (Welwyn Garden City), cake sales (Hitchin and Letchworth), and an acapella concert (Hertford), and made donations from their meeting's resources, to a wide range of Quaker organisations and other associations sharing our values in promoting peace and justice. Welwyn Garden City Meeting donated a large amount to the Palestine Trauma Centre after their offices were bombed. Meetings subscribed to organisations such as Campaign Against the Arms Trade and Individuals from other meetings actively supported Israeli conscientious objectors and groups protesting against the London arms trade fair (DSEI). Other charities supported, local and national, included:

- Glebe House (Friends Therapeutic Community Trust, Cambs)
- Jackie's Drop In Centre for disabled adults and children
- Herts Domestic Abuse Helpline
- Tree Aid (NGO tackling climate poverty in Southern Africa)
- Food banks
- Helping Herts Homeless
- Herts Welcomes Refugees
- Diapalante (community education project in Senegal)
- Friends' School Ramallah
- St Francis Leprosy Guild
- Embrace the Middle East
- Brumana High School in the Lebanon

A number of health and disability support groups hire our premises regularly and as part of our witness, our hire rates are set at an affordable or discounted rate to enable them to make use of our facilities.

8. Financial governance

During 2023 the Area Meeting continued to pursue policies of good governance and furtherance of our charitable objectives in compliance with its governing document.

Fiscal oversight was achieved at all levels by the receipt and acceptance of both the examined Area Meeting business accounts, and also the receipt of the examined Area Meeting amalgamated accounts, for 2022 for the local meetings over which it had oversight. The proposed budget, financial timetable, and Area Meeting Quotas for 2024 were received and accepted.

9. Trustees

During 2023 four trustees served. The trustees see one of their functions as providing advice and counsel to local meetings. Trustees occasionally flag up matters of concern to Area Meeting for Business by minute and may bring proposals. Trustees appoint representatives to all Area Meeting Business Meetings. New trustees are appointed by the Area Meeting following expressions of interest from local meetings and nominations by local meetings. The trustees compiled the Annual Report for 2022 on the activities of the Area Meeting, which was presented to the Area Meeting Business Meeting and submitted to the Charity Commission. The trustees also produced a report to Area Meeting Business Meeting on trustees' activities. During 2023 all trustee meetings were quorate and minutes were kept of matters discussed.

Financial Review 2023

- 1. Reserves Policy** The reserves policy for Area Meeting central funds is based on holding money in various nominal funds at Area Meeting level. We are in the process of running down some central Area Meeting funds as agreed by the Treasurer in consultation with Finance Committee. The target levels are as follows:

Funds held for the following purposes	Amount £
Properties Emergency Fund	15,000
General Purposes	11,000
Designated funds:	
Peace Group	500
Quaker Work	1,000
Camp Committee	5,000
Total	32,500

The actual total value of the central funds at 31 December 2023 was £36,812.

For the operation of local meetings, it is expected that each of these should hold enough reserves to operate for 1 year and meet future building requirements. The target level of funds for 2023 were:

Local Meeting	Amount £
Guilden Morden	100
Hertford	10,000
Hitchin	10,000
Letchworth	14,000
Stevenage	11,000
Welwyn Garden City	46,000
Total	91,100

The criteria and levels of reserves for local meetings are currently under review.

- 2. Income and Expenditure** None of the Area Meeting's funds were in deficit during 2023. At 31st December 2023, the Area Meeting had a total cash value of £372,348 (2022: £324,394).
- 3. Income:** Following the significant insurance repayments in 2022, we received a further payment for lost income during the Covid shutdowns, but the major component of our income in 2023 was from lettings. Total income in 2023 was £214,765 (2022: £300,882). Income in the previous year has been unusually increased by a large legacy, so the fall in income in 2023 is not of concern.

Funds from Friends, including Gift Aid refunds, were £37,060 (2022: £38,702).

Income from letting our Meeting Houses etc was £109,379 (2022: £94,217), 2.5% below pre-pandemic income but somewhat recovered compared to 2022. Much of the letting business has now returned, but there are some previous hirers who no longer operate.

Grants or donations from outside bodies were £16,000 (2022: £35,850). This includes a grant of £15,000 for various aspects of the work at Peace Cottage at Hoddesdon. At the end of 2023, £20,518 remained held as

restricted funds for the purpose of developing Peace Cottage; this includes some donations by individual Friends for this purpose. Grants to local meetings amounted to £1,000, mostly for work on the Hertford Meeting House which is a Grade 1 Listed Building; this work was completed within 2023.

Interest received on cash balances was £10,701 (2022: £2,581).

- 4. Expenditure:** Our largest expenditure remains the insurance, maintenance, and improvement of our properties, at £124,705 (2022: £159,176) in support of our role as a religious organisation at a local level. This includes planned expenditure at the Peace Cottage, Hoddesdon, of £4,761 to repair and improve the property, of which £3,442 was funded by external grants and donations. Further substantial work was completed at Peace Cottage late in 2023, to be paid for in 2024 from the accumulated funds mentioned above.

In 2023, £24,252 (2022: £21,415) was expended on grants and other support to outside bodies, of which about 72% went to Britain Yearly Meeting in furtherance of the centrally organised work of the Religious Society of Friends.

The amount spent on administration within the Area Meeting in 2023 was £17,621 (2022: £15,264).

- 5. Investment Policy:** Our funds are mostly held by or invested in organisations with good ethical policies such as Triodos Bank, Ecology Building Society, Co-operative Bank. Some funds are held by Lloyds Bank and National Westminster Bank. Investments are regularly reviewed, and care is taken that no institution holds funds in excess of the limits of the Financial Services Compensation Scheme.

Key plans for the future

- To grow our membership and develop outreach, particularly to engage the interest of families and younger attenders.
- To balance the use of our time and energy between management of our premises and Quaker witness through action
- Carry on support of food banks and homelessness initiatives and participate in Hertfordshire refugee support programmes.
- Peace Cottage Community Hub project – to continue to build ties with the local community, attract more local use of the building, and progress with the improvements to the building, including obtaining a grant to instal sustainable heating
- Continue to find ways towards reducing our carbon footprint and make our buildings more sustainable.
- To use our newly acquired knowledge of virtual communication to develop Quaker community and Quaker work.
- Continue to implement learning from the ‘Simpler Meetings’ approach to managing roles within local and area meetings, to reduce the burden on a small number of role holders.
- To undertake maintenance and repairs to local meeting Houses, when funds are available
- To engage services outside the Society to take on management of some administrative tasks if needed
- Trustees to continue work on establishing more formal agreements (Memoranda of Understanding) as to the reciprocal responsibilities of the Area Meeting and its constituent bodies (local meetings).