

York Fighting Coronavirus Together

Annual General Meeting Report

by Jason Rose, YFCT Chair

Summary Statement

A year ago, nobody could have known the changes that 2020 would bring to the world. Many countries had pandemic preparedness plans, but very few were designed to handle anything even close to approximating a virus challenge like the one we have experienced. So it is no surprise that when coronavirus reached the UK we were culturally and structurally unequipped to prevent the virus from spreading across the country.

The first confirmed cases were found locally in York, and it was a while before additional cases were seen in the city, but by that time the responses across China, Italy, Iran, South Korea and other countries showed that we would need to prepare for a significant period of lockdown- which in the UK would be unlike anything seen since the Second World War.

Across the country, various different organisations and groups sprung up, with eclectic purposes. Many of these were mutual aid groups, intentionally designed to enable people to help their neighbours in numerous disparate ways. Many were informational groups, either sharing details about the science or summaries of the national and local policies. Many were focussed on working with those who were vulnerable; others on those who needed shopping or those who were isolated or those who needed economic support.

As the coronavirus response led to large-scale unemployment and other significant consequences, more groups provided additional support, including a massive increase in foodbank usage across the country and also locally in our city. Each Local Authority had to revisit its long-term economic strategies and adapt for both the current circumstances and a change to the recovery plans. As I write this report, in September 2020, we have had ten straight weeks of rising case numbers across the UK and around a month of case rate increases in York, presenting significant challenges for future planning.

Our organisation started out as a rapid response group in the Bishopthorpe Road area, which gathered social media attention and then press attention. The bulk of the credit in getting a head-start on an organisational side goes to Johnny Hayes MBE and particularly Jimmy Richards, who had an active Facebook group already reported in the press by 12th March. Over the next month or so this grew into the complex organisation that is still going strong with over 10,000 members of over two dozen Facebook groups, led by a Trustee Board, and driven by a team of hard-working volunteers. Jimmy and Johnny appointed me as the organisational Chair and I led the recruitment of the Trustees. We registered with the Charity Commission on 27th April and were confirmed as registered charity no 1189632 on 22nd May 2020.

In many ways, the organisation has had two separate sets of activities ever since.

We have been providing information services, coordination efforts, and connections between volunteers and opportunities; championing the challenges of the general public; and communicating the changes to local and national policy to ensure that organisations and individuals are behaving safely, are not spreading the virus, and are aware of the help that they can provide and that they can access.

In parallel, we have been standing up the longer-term organisational facets such as our purposes and values (and finances and licensing) and we're now in a stable place to proceed as an organisation, with new

initiatives such as livestreams moving up the agenda- with one informative livestream completed and one adjacent to our AGM.

All in all, the response from our members and the wider public has been extremely positive. As an organisation whose primary purpose is to facilitate and support other organisations, signposting people to existing services instead of providing them ourselves where possible, it is hard to set out objectives or discuss success in isolation. I have attempted to do so in successive sections in this report. It is also extremely difficult to see the positives in a health crisis that is unlike anything seen in York in a century. But if we take a look at York overall, we can see the success that our city has had in controlling the virus and can be glad that we have played some part in that.

Comparing with the ten most similarly-sized cities (Aberdeen, Chelmsford, Dundee, Oxford, Peterborough, Portsmouth, Salford, Southampton, Swansea and Westminster), our total confirmed case figure of approximately 1,000 ranks favourably; Chelmsford and Portsmouth are the only two to have fewer cases than York, and are the *only* two from the best-performing regions whereas York comes from one of the two worst-performing regions, and has half the number of cases of the only other city in those regions (Salford).

Additionally, we have one of the highest average population ages, and were the first city to have cases, so we should be very satisfied with our proactive early response and with how we have handled things. Our worst hit community was, easily, care home residents, driven by a lack of national preparedness on both policy and personal protective equipment (PPE) availability.

Lots of other organisations deserve a huge amount of credit for their responses in the city, and rightly the majority of them have had their success explicitly called out by local awards. The City of York Council also deserves credit for a range of factors, including the development of the largest volunteer initiative in the city's history and a continual preference for encouraging and advising in favour of behaviours that would later also be recommended by national health leaders.

Every aspect of York's evolving culture has played a part in reducing the number of cases and deaths.

Within YFCT, we have also had a huge number of amazing volunteers (indeed too many to call out individually in this report), but all of whom know personally the amount of work that they have put in and will hopefully be aware of the difference that it has made to this city.

As we look towards the next 6-12 months of pandemic, and the years of both economic and health recovery that will follow, we need to consider our response as individuals and as organisations. We need compassion for all sorts of victims; those who have suffered from coronavirus symptoms, who have lost people to COVID-19, who have been hit hard financially, who have deeply struggled with mental health or domestic violence or hundreds of other struggles that can often remain hidden. York has fought coronavirus together so far, but we need to continue to fight the virus and its effects for a long time to come.

Thank you all for your past, present, and future support.

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2 Summary of Purposes

York Fighting Coronavirus Together has a specific object, encouraged by the Charity Commission: “The object of the CIO is to develop the capacity and skills of the members of the socially and economically disadvantaged community of those in and around York who have been affected by coronavirus and its consequences, in such a way that they are better able to identify, and help meet, their needs, and to participate more fully in society.”

We have also been acting against a more detailed vision, mission, and value statement. This can be found in full detail separately, but focusses on the wellbeing and safety of everyone in the York area through activities such as supporting local action related to coronavirus, working with local organisations, providing relevant updates, signposting to official services, and enabling local initiatives (etc).

It is clear that these purposes are beneficial to York and wider society (both during a pandemic and independently to it) and that there is no detriment, but providing evidence of impact is challenging.

We know that our Facebook community was the bulk source of the Council’s volunteers, and also applied in large numbers to many of the key organisations like Age UK York, York CVS, York Foodbank, SASH, York Neighbours, etc.

We can also see numerical values in a number of metrics on Facebook. Aggregating across all groups is extremely complicated, but metrics from the main Facebook ‘Hub’ can show a glimpse into the scale across 26 groups and a Page. The Hub has had 816 Facebook posts with 1833 comments, 5,637 reactions and 138,311 interactions (e.g. “read more”). The Facebook Page has additional metrics, with the average reach per day at 2,504 with per post reach at 1,351 per photo and 1,145 per video (fewer for web links, which we have tended to avoid due to Facebook’s algorithms).

Most of the other activity, e.g. involving emailing and web meetings and private messaging, is virtually impossible to quantify, as it has involved numerous people within YFCT and has been continually occurring

for almost six months. Everything that we have done has been to support the purposes, with no known negative effects for the York or wider community, and none of our volunteers or trustees have benefited in any way other than by being part of a community that is generally safer and better informed.

3 Organisation Structure

YFCT has been managed and led by a Trustee Board since becoming a charity, with the organisation's Chair fully accountable to them and formally reporting to them at every meeting (at least monthly).

Beyond the Trustee Board, the organisation has changed shape a lot over the months, and is currently structured with a relatively flat team of Facebook comment and content moderators (some of whom have admin privileges) led by the organisation's Chair with the Facebook Page having formal ownership of all 26 Facebook groups.

The future structure of the organisation is less clear. My current expectation is that the new Trustee Board will formally determine the management approach of the organisation, and will meet monthly. Current activities are distributed based on access permissions rather than formalised structure, and this seems likely to change appropriately to ensure that governance is based on formal role instead of historic activities, for instance the new Treasurer formally leading all HMRC and banking, a formalised webmaster managing all domains, completing centralised password and asset storage and reducing organisational single points of failure. However this is all speculative and will ultimately be at the entire discretion of the new Trustee Board.

4 Actions and Achievements

4.1 Our Volunteers

4.1.1 Facebook Volunteering

The majority of the organisational work, coordination, signposting, support and information sharing has been through Facebook. We did have plans to expand to support Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Nextdoor and other platforms, and provide a news section on our website and a weekly email newsletter, but as people returned to work the number of active volunteers reduced and we chose not to overstretch nor bid for funding to cover those costs.

Through Facebook we provided thousands of people with support, resources, and information such as clear explanations of both national and local policy as well as scientific coronavirus updates. We primarily focussed on ensuring that data was from reliable official sources, and that it was apolitical and directly about the coronavirus situation.

Though it is difficult to get precise metrics from Facebook, not least because the many Groups and Page interact in unusual ways and have some membership overlap, but best estimates put total membership at around ten thousand people and the last six months have seen them interact with posts a total of around half a million times. Approximately three-quarters of members are women, and approximately three-quarters of members are aged 25-54.

To achieve all of this activity, while ensuring that we aren't sharing inaccurate media reports or biased/politically charged information, we have had a team of between twenty and eighty (depending on the time period) Facebook administrators and moderators. Many of these volunteers have put work in every single day to ensure that there is accurate relevant content across every Group.

Some of the information that people were seeking wasn't readily available. As the country started to lock down, increasing numbers of people sought online food delivery services (especially as supermarket delivery

slots became increasingly unavailable). Similarly, as it became clear that there was insufficient PPE in York and beyond, people were looking for reliable ways of getting access to them. In addition to explaining and repeating the best ways of ensuring safety, YFCT also generated lots of direct content by collecting it from sources and encouraging the general membership to identify and resolve anything that was inaccurate. Particular thanks must go to the Haxby Facebook group for leading the delivery information initiative.

Ultimately, the breadth and depth of the volunteer efforts through Facebook are too expansive for me to detail in full, but there are a lot of people who deserve an incredible amount of praise for their extraordinary hard work- and will hopefully always remember that at the darkest and most intense periods of the crisis they put in some serious hours to achieve some fantastic things and ultimately save lives.

4.1.2 Flyer Volunteering

Alongside Facebook activity, we were continually looking at ways to assist in sharing information to the wider community. According to online statistics only 44% of the UK are active on Facebook which means that the majority of the country is *not*, particularly in a city with an older-skewing population such as York. The primary demographic of those most vulnerable to coronavirus is also the demographic who are least connected to social media- and to the internet in general.

As a result we decided to focus efforts on flyers, which were at that time not available to anyone. The primary concern was getting information about the Council's new coronavirus assistance services (email and phone number) to as many people as possible, but things like delivery services and health support were also unavailable to most of York without reliable internet access and with libraries closed many older or poorer people had their only digital access taken away from them. We also wanted to ensure that information about domestic violence services reached people who may be more cut-off from the outside world to usual.

It took some volunteers a lot of time to get all of the appropriate information together and design appropriate flyers, in parallel to a lot of time going into ensuring that the appropriate flyer delivery policy was developed. Ultimately there were numerous limiting factors such as budget, volunteer numbers, geographic areas of activity, and doors per volunteer. Trying to logistically coordinate numerous grant applications in parallel to flyer creation, printing, and delivery, and coordination of volunteers took numerous people a large amount of time. In the end the focus was on areas with active volunteers and direct funding including Bishopthorpe Road, Fishergate, Fulford, the Groves, Haxby, Heslington, Holgate, South Bank and Wigginton.

Safety restrictions included strict rules on gloves or hand washing, strict rules on the maximum numbers of houses per deliverer, and a strong recommendation for people to wear home-made face coverings, at a time where national and local guidance was that face coverings were not an effective way of controlling the virus despite WHO and scientific consensus.

In total, we delivered 31,500 leaflets to households containing approximately 80,000 people, with help from over 500 volunteers across the city. It couldn't have been done without the financial support of the City of York Council and one major donor, nor without the patience and quality of Fulprint at a time when distancing limited their speed and demand was higher than usual.

We haven't delivered flyers to houses since May, and it would take significant funding to provide a full city-wide leaflet.

4.1.3 Website Volunteering

We also put time into developing a website with key information on it. This particularly included an online source for delivery service information that could lay the content out much more clearly than either a single image or a wall of text could on Facebook.

Particular thanks must go to a specific Bishopthorpe volunteer who set the site up initially, and a Woodthorpe volunteer who redesigned the look and feel and also supported the site afterwards. Additionally, we had several hard-working volunteers maintaining the content by proactively checking the social media accounts and websites of a colossal number of organisations across York and again I hope that they are proud of the amount of effort they put in and our web achievements.

The original website was in very active use for its short duration, and the new website has received approximately 30,000 total hits since the start of May.

4.2 Our Partnerships

Proactivity from numerous volunteers joined us up with a wide variety of organisations and individuals across York. Some of these were known people who could provide particular insight, such as medical experts or local Councillors. Others were local pharmacies, GPs or businesses. We were also joined up with specific initiatives such as the York Virtual High Street, Connected York, York Supper Collective and helped to share a variety of information and signpost towards the most reliable services.

4.2.1 Opportunity Signposting

Lots of people, particularly at the start of the coronavirus pandemic awareness period, came to our organisation to offer to volunteer. We took an early decision that it would be inappropriate and unreliable for us to offer services that were already being provided by others and that we would- unless the service didn't already exist- always point people in the direction of other groups for volunteering purposes.

We raised a lot of awareness of the NHS Volunteering scheme when it was launched, and prior to that the Council's similar volunteering scheme that ensured people would have access to the food, medicine and direct support they needed to avoid any crisis that could threaten lives. All in all, the Council had over 4,000 volunteers providing over 27,000 hours of support to around 5,000 people who asked for help, including via a number of Hubs throughout the city, and many of those volunteers came through our organisation and its volunteer signposting including a few volunteers who helped to run Hubs or coordinate their volunteers.

Additionally we were approached by many volunteer organisations to link up with people who were able to provide support. We provided dozens of volunteers to pharmacies to help support a delivery service that ensured vulnerable people wouldn't need to go into risky environments. We helped to link people up with GPs and care homes and other organisations who only needed a few volunteers with specific skills and the ability to leave the house and travel safely. Myriad other individual circumstances could be called out one-by-one but ultimately there was so much volunteering going on across the city and so much collaboration between groups that there will be many that our leadership won't even have been made aware of.

We also helped to support a wide variety of fundraising activities for numerous voluntary groups and joined up various individuals, businesses and non-profit organisations with funding opportunities and larger grant-funders.

4.2.2 Information Signposting

Alongside signposting people towards opportunities, and in addition to providing lots of information from numerous official sources, we have provided lots of signposting to information sources and helplines.

This includes providing advice if people messaged us directly about which official bodies are most able to assist in certain circumstances, sharing a wide variety of links to official resources and tagging them to make them easier to find on demand, being available to respond almost instantaneously for 20 hours per day at the peak of the crisis, and sharing lots of resources and links to organisations that provide professional signposting.

Sometimes this has included wrapping official advice or signposting details in new formatting to make it easier to follow, or finding an area of mediocre support and spending significant time identifying better sources or collating numerous official links across the internet and condensing it into a more palatable Facebook post. We also triaged all of the sources to identify the most significant for the flyers and similar 'highlight' content.

4.2.3 Coronavirus Safety Support

In addition to supporting organisations in linking up with others or getting funding, we also provided groups with accurate collated advice on safety.

This included the safe production, delivery and handling of face coverings and other masks- including identifying high risk situations such as care home workers using masks that were made by other people the same day, or social carers who were rotating shifts between vulnerable individuals and coronavirus-positive patients with very limited PPE- all in association with medical organisations and professionals.

It also included supporting centralised organisations with high safety standards to bring in additional people, such as those making visors at home with 3D printers being directed to those organisations that had been vetted and approved by the Council and those who wanted to make large amounts of hot good food for people in need being joined up with the Supper Collective to ensure it was appropriately coordinated (with nobody getting multiple by playing the system, and nobody missed off due to limited capacity) and safe.

Through this method, we greatly reduced the number of occasions where York residents were taken advantage of by people falsely asking for money (as happened in some York groups and in larger numbers in various places across the country), and *also* helped to reduce the spread of the virus at a time when virus transmission was a critical threat to our health service capacity and to plenty of residents.

4.2.4 Other Organisations

In addition to engagement with the public, we have also regularly discussed challenges with other organisations, answered direct questions or provided intelligence, and shared key messages or requests on their behalf.

The most notable of these has been the City of York Council, with whom we have worked very closely in a variety of different ways. At various times we have engaged directly with the Leader of the City of York Council and other members of the Executive team, senior Council staff members, individual departments, Community Involvement Officers, and various ad hoc officers. At one time we were sent communication dept content to share directly from our groups, though when they returned to regular policy conversations (beyond just coronavirus) we migrated to selectively choosing their content and mixing it with other organisations. We passed various snippets of information to the Council on a near-daily basis, to assist in closing down challenges on a citywide basis, and liaised with schools and care organisations and other tangentially related organisations.

Outside of the Council, we often attended (and occasionally coordinated) meetings between various organisations and supported the efforts of numerous groups such as Parish Councils, Community Associations, local community groups, non-profit voluntary organisations and charities, groups who were coordinating major coronavirus responses, and York CVS. We also worked with some independent businesses and charity shops to support individual situations and helped join some up with the York Virtual High Street initiative.

Many of these groups deserve far more credit than they'll ever receive for their impact on our city, and we have been privileged to have been involved in supporting them in any way.

5 Financial Situation

At the time of writing, we have £353.89 in our bank account and taking all owed money into account (£150.30 in donations through Facebook and CAF) we hold net assets of £504.19.

To date, we have received a total of £1592.58 (£874.28 in donations and £718.30 in grants) and have spent £1088.39 (predominantly on printing information leaflets in the peak of the crisis).

Further detail is provided in our Financial Report.