

Meeting up during lockdown

Lockdown is still with us and although we in Woking can get out for a coffee, visit close family and do many basic activities, we are not able to meet up, face to face, with larger groups of friends, colleagues or members of the public. Nor are we going to risk meeting the elderly or infirm because the risk for them is too great. But that shouldn't stop us meeting, seeing and talking to them using a computer or smart phone.

Remember seeing video phones in 1970s science fiction shows? The lockdown has made many of us take note of the technology now available and give it a go, even if we are a bit reluctant. There are plenty of easy-to-use applications that enable video calls – many of them free and installed by default on modern phones, tablets and computers. One application is Zoom, which costs nothing, and you can meet for 40 minutes using the free version. Meanwhile, you can have free instant messaging and video calls using FaceTime or WhatsApp.

Surely it is so much better to see and talk to others this way than to assume it's all too difficult and not even try.

Of course, the person you're talking to will need access to a device and a wi-fi or mobile signal, but that can be planned. Many elderly people have care visitors who could help set the link up and chaperone the call. To them, it will be just like seeing you on television.

It's not just individuals you can now see. What about all those useful meetings you had in your community, or the group of friends you met with regularly? Better to meet remotely over the airwaves than not to meet at all. Neighbourhood Watch across the UK is using tools like Zoom to hold coordinator meetings. Here in Woking, Neighbourhood Watch coordinators will be meeting virtually on Zoom, from the comfort of their homes rather than having to travel in the dark chilly autumn evenings.

In some ways, these virtual meetings work better than their real-life equivalents. Woking Police are holding live Q&A sessions on Facebook with hundreds taking part – that's a much larger number than would attend a meeting in person. The sessions aren't just one-way, you can ask questions too.

We need to accept restrictions on gatherings aren't going to be lifted soon and the use of technology for holding meetings is inevitable. In fact, many global companies have been using it as a matter of routine for some time. We all hope to get back to face-to-face meetings, with our cups of tea and cake, as soon as we can. But let's not lose all the opportunities to meet in the meantime. Pull up a chair, open your computer and put the kettle on!