



Al-Anon Information Service

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November 19th 2021

Dear Area Committees,

Further to the Al-Anon Information Service management committee review of its services and recommendation that Areas 14,15,19,23 and 29 consider closing the service, it is now evident that no clear consensus emerged at the Autumn assemblies. It was therefore decided at the EGM on November 13th to postpone the vote on closing the service till the AGM in 2022 in order to allow the Areas to further consider the matter at the spring assemblies.

All the Al-Anon members and groups that voted at the autumn Area assemblies to keep the local Information Service open had valid reasons and concerns. The attached Information Service Review report outlined how changes that members would experience after the closure of the local service, if any, would be minor in nature and not significant. While many are naturally sad to see anything familiar end, no one has presented a strong case for keeping the service open.

In giving the question of closure further consideration the management committee would like to bring to the attention of the Areas the information contained in the Al-Anon Family Groups UK & Éire Service Manual on p79-80 and p117-118 about local services and the UK13 Guidelines on Local Al-Anon Information Services that govern the operation of the Information Services, copies of which are attached to this letter.

Al-Anon worldwide has always relied on local Information Services set up by Groups and Areas. To maintain harmony in the fellowship local Information Services have always been clearly separated out from the Al-Anon structure to avoid any issues with finances or authority. This separation means there can never be any formal cooperation or collaboration between the local Information Service and the central Al-Anon service structure. Irrespective of the local groups wishes, the local office, other than providing information, can play no other meaningful role in the local Al-Anon despite the considerable financial and volunteer resources the Areas provide to sustain it.

The local Information Service, nevertheless, is the most visible element of Al-Anon in Ireland and is naturally assumed by most members to represent the Al-Anon UK & Eire structure in Ireland when in fact the two are in no way connected. The removal of the local Information Service will therefore not affect in any way the central service structure that serves the Al-Anon Groups in Ireland. The closure should make the central service structure more visible, reduce confusion among members and make Al-Anon simpler to understand and participate in.

Al-Anon Family Groups CLG is the local Irish charity recently established by Al-Anon UK & Éire to comply with Irish charity regulations. It is totally separate to the long established charity Family Groups Information Centre Ltd t/a Al-Anon Information Service that currently operates the Information Service office and the local Al-Anon helpline. As the regulation of charities and helplines becomes stricter, especially in relation to young or vulnerable people, if the operation of the meetings and helpline is divided among two totally separate charities it is going to become more difficult for Al-Anon to maintain and demonstrate compliance with regulations and best practice. Al-Anon Family Groups CLG, as part of Al-Anon UK & Éire, is now best placed to operate the Al-Anon helpline as the sole legal Al-Anon entity in Ireland. If the helpline is transferred, it need not affect in any way how the helpline is currently operated, nor will it require the phone number to be changed. The transfer will remove all GDPR issues that arise from operating two separate charities, as they currently cannot share any data.

Progress in technology is the main reason why a separate local Information Service is no longer required. As set out clearly in the August review the central Information Service can easily serve all the local Areas' needs. The closure is not being proposed due to a current lack of funds or volunteers. Groups should be made aware however that a level of donations and volunteer participation far higher than before will definitely be required if the Groups decide to retain a local Information Service and to not support the clear recommendation to close that the management committee have made.

The roles of Director [former Chairperson role], PI Coordinator and Meeting List Coordinator have remained unfilled for three years. The current Secretary, Treasurer, and Volunteer Coordinator will all be stepping down at the next AGM in Spring 2022. Unless these key roles are filled, the board of trustees, six of whom are appointed by the six Areas and three of whom are appointed by the Information Service, will have no choice other than to close the charity. All roles in the Information Service, other than the external auditor, are unpaid volunteering roles despite the significant time commitment required. The current average annual donations of €20,000 will not be sufficient to run the charity in compliance with the requirements of the Irish Charities Regulator.

We ask all Groups and Areas to give this letter and the review their attention and to make copies available to all Members and Groups. The letter and review can be downloaded from www.alanon.ie on the right side of the members page. Once dates of the Spring 2022 Assemblies or any special meetings Areas convene to discuss the recommended closure are clear, we will advise Areas of the date for the 2022 AGM at which the decision to close will be voted on by the Trustees. As the committee who have operated the service with pleasure for over six years and whose only aim is to support Al-Anon and see it grow, we have no hesitation in stating a separate information service is no longer required. There is a time for everything.

Yours in Al-Anon service

Bryan O'K
Secretary on behalf of Management Committee, Al-Anon Information Service
[Registered Charity - Family Groups Information Centre Ltd]

cc Regional Trustee Éire

Further to the Al-Anon Information Service Review issued in August 2021 by the Family Groups Information Centre Ltd. Management Committee the following resolution will be voted on at the Annual General Meeting of the Company to be held in Spring 2022

Resolution

that the provision of Al-Anon information services to Al-Anon Areas 14, 15, 16, 19, 23 and 29 is best provided directly and exclusively by the Al-Anon UK & Éire General Service Office [GSO] in acknowledgement of the enormous and continuous changes in modern technology and business systems that have occurred since a local service was originally established

and

that the Capel Street office be closed and the Family Groups Information Centre Ltd. helpline, literature stock and financial reserves be transferred to Al-Anon Family Groups CLG [the new company registered by Al-Anon UK & Éire in Ireland] unless otherwise directed by Al-Anon Areas 14, 15, 16, 19, 23 and 29

and

that Family Groups Information Centre Ltd t/a Al-Anon Information Service be wound up at the earliest convenient date that allows it to comply with its legal requirements as a registered charity and company

and

that the fellowship of Al-Anon acknowledge the enormous debt of gratitude owed to all the volunteers, both past and present, who provided Al-Anon information services when they were not otherwise easily available in Areas 14, 15, 16, 19, 23 and 29

At a meeting of the Area : _____

on Date : _____

The groups in our Area have voted in favour of the resolution.

The groups in our Area have voted against the resolution

Signed

Date

Area Role

Guidelines

Local Al-Anon Information Services

The Shared Experience of Al-Anon Members

Al-Anon Information Centres are established by one or more Areas or by groups located close enough to each other for easy access and communication. Any local Al-Anon or Alateen group may participate in an information service. The service exists to serve in the common purpose of carrying the Al-Anon message to the suffering families and friends of alcoholics.

NAMING A SERVICE

The name Al-Anon Information Services or Information Centres is used for local services. The term Al-Anon Central Services is reserved for offices serving entire countries. Al-Anon General Services refers to the General Service Offices serving an entire structure.

ANSWERING SERVICES

The term Answering Service is usually used for service entities that handle only Twelfth-Step telephone calls. The decision to implement and support this service is within the autonomy of the groups it serves.

HOW DOES AN INFORMATION SERVICE BECOME REGISTERED?

The General Service Office will register an Information Service when it meets the following requirements:

1. Has a title indicative of the nature of its operation, for example, ".....Al-Anon Information Centre".
2. Acquires a post office box number or an office address.
3. Maintains a listing in the local telephone directory.
4. Conducts activities in addition to Twelve-Step telephone calls. For example, works with local Al-Anon/Alateen service committees and publishes meeting lists.

WHAT SERVICE DOES AN INFORMATION CENTRE PROVIDE?

- Maintains an up-to-date list of groups and contact numbers
- receives telephone calls from potential members and directs them to the appropriate group
- channels Public Information work through Districts and Groups whenever possible
- maintains a stock of Conference-Approved Literature for sale to local groups. Registered Information Centres are currently allowed a bulk purchase discount on literature purchased from the General Service Office (GSO)
- where possible, provides a telephone helpline.

HOW IS AN INFORMATION CENTRE MANAGED?

A committee is appointed to manage the Information Centre by the participating Area or Groups:

- the Committee holds periodic meetings with Information Centre Representatives (ICRs)
- an Information Centre Representative is appointed by the Area and serves on the Area Service Committee.

WHO OPERATES THE TELEPHONE HELPLINE?

In accordance with our Traditions, telephone calls are answered by volunteers who are Al-Anon members. Coverage works best when a monthly rota of members, willing to give their time to this

service, is drawn up by the Information Centre Committee.

Finding volunteers for this service may be one of the hardest tasks in setting up an information service. It is, however, one of the most important if distressed callers are to be informed of the nearest local groups

HOW DOES THE INFORMATION SERVICE FIT INTO THE AREA AND DISTRICT STRUCTURE?

An Al-Anon Information Service exists, first and foremost, to disseminate information about Al-Anon and Alateen.

It has no authority or structural role in relation to Groups, Districts or Area.

Al-Anon members from the local Groups, Districts and Area are responsible for the smooth running of the service.

HOW IS CONTINUITY MAINTAINED?

According to Tradition Eight, paid staff may be engaged to deal with the day to day running of the Information Centre. It is prudent to engage Al-Anon members for some, if not all, of these tasks, as their knowledge of the programme will be of great assistance.

The hiring and firing of such staff is the responsibility of the Information Centre Committee which oversees the management of the Centre.

“Employees in Al-Anon Services

...Any Al-Anon member who is gainfully employed in an Al-Anon service does not serve as a volunteer in a policy-making position, such as Group Representative (GR), District Representative (DR), Area Service Committee Officer or Co-ordinator, Delegate or Trustee.

Autonomy of Groups

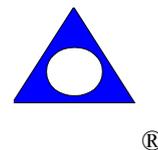
In keeping with the Traditions and Warranty Five of Concept Twelve (Part 5), local, Area or UK & Eire service entities have no authority to close a group or engage in other punitive actions against a group because they disapprove of the way in which a group practices the Al-Anon programme.” See page 119 Al-Anon Family Groups UK & Eire Service Manual.

NOTE

Groups are reminded that whilst an effective Information Service needs proper support, it is important to ensure that it does not become a drain on the General Fund of Al-Anon as a whole.

Further information and guidance may be obtained by contacting the General Service Office (GSO) and by study of the Service Manual.

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General Information

Service Handbook

Al-Anon Information Services

An Al-Anon/Alateen Information Service is a local service centre established by one or more Areas or by Groups located close enough to one another for easy access and communication. Geographical boundaries need not be observed unless one Information Service conflicts with another nearby. In this case the boundaries should be set by mutual agreement.

An Information Service usually, but not necessarily, performs the following functions:

- maintains a listing in the local telephone directory, providing a telephone number for those seeking information about Al-Anon and Alateen
- maintains a PO Box number or an office address for listing with the General Service Office

Service Handbook

- receives post and telephone enquiries and channels them to the nearest Group
- distributes lists of Group meetings
- serves as an avenue for local Public Information (PI) which is channelled through the Area whenever possible
- maintains a stock of Conference Approved Literature (CAL) and may register with the WSO as a Literature Distribution Centre (LDC) for CAL
- holds periodic meetings attended by all the Information Centre Representatives. Group problems are discussed in light of the Twelve Traditions
- prints and distributes a newsletter about local activities for the Groups that support it.

Any local Al-Anon or Alateen Group may agree to support an Information Service, but joining is purely voluntary. The Information Service is supported by the Groups it serves within its geographical boundaries; it should not seek or accept support outside that area. Contributions are voluntary and are not a condition of membership.

Representation

Where an Information Service is supported by one Area only, the following method of representation is recommended.

It is suggested that the Alternate Group Representative serve as the Information Centre Representative (ICR) and the GR serve as the Alternate Information Centre Representative. In addition, the Alternate District Representative is a member of the Information Centre's Board, and the DR generally serves as the Alternate Information Centre Board member.

Note: The above is based on the World Service Structure where an Information Service/Centre serves only one Area. In the UK & Éire, each of the Information Centres has evolved in a different way.

Local Services

Naming a Service

Al-Anon Information Services, or groups that perform similar services, also call themselves Information Services, Service Centres or Information Centres. The term 'Al-Anon Central Services' is reserved for offices serving entire states, provinces or Areas. Al-Anon General Services refers to structures serving countries other than the US and Canada.

Answering Services

The term 'Answering Service' is usually used for service entities that handle only Twelfth-Step telephone calls. The decision to implement and support this service is within the autonomy of the groups it serves.

Information Services

Requirements for Registration at WSO/GSO

GSO registers an Information Service when it meets the following requirements:

- has a title indicative of the nature of its operation, e.g., 'Al-Anon Information Service'
- acquires a post office box number or an office address
- conducts activities in addition to Twelfth Step telephone calls, for example: works with local Al-Anon/Alateen service committees; arranges group exchange meetings; publishes meeting lists and performs any other function as outlined in Part 1.

NB. GSO will inform WSO of all Information Services registered at GSO.

Finding Al-Anon/Alateen Worldwide

Al-Anon Information Services and General Service Offices worldwide which meet the above requirements are listed in the publication *Getting In Touch With Al-Anon/Alateen* (available from the WSO). Since individuals' names, addresses, or telephone numbers are not disclosed, this listing can be used by the membership as well as the public and professional community.

Co-operation

Chairmen of local information service committees should communicate with the respective Area Co-ordinator.

Employees in Al-Anon Services

Tradition Eight states that 'Al-Anon Twelfth-Step work should remain forever non-professional..'. Therefore, any Al-Anon member who is gainfully employed in an Al-Anon Information Centre does not serve as a volunteer in a policy-making position, such as Group Representative (GR), District Representative (DR), Area Service Committee Officer or Co-ordinator, Delegate or Trustee.

Autonomy of Groups

In keeping with the Traditions and Warranty Five of Concept Twelve (*Part 4*), local, Area or UK & Éire service entities have no authority to close a group or engage in other punitive actions against a group because they disapprove of the way in which a group practises the Al-Anon programme.

Local Information Services : Éire Region

Al-Anon Information Service Review

August 2021

AI-Anon Information Service Review

August 2021

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Al-Anon Information Service

The Al-Anon Information Service [AIS] exists to provide Public Information, Meeting information and Literature to Al-Anon members and the public in Ireland through the office, helpline and website. The current review was established to examine the most effective way of delivering these services to the 6 Al-Anon Areas in Al-Anon Éire Region.

1.2 Al-Anon UK & Eire

All the Al-Anon groups in Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales belong to Al-Anon UK & Eire. Groups are organized into 6 Regions that are subdivided into 30 Areas and further subdivided into Districts. A General Service Board [GSB] and General Service Office [GSO] based in London manage the affairs of Al-Anon UK & Eire and organize an annual conference at which the Groups meet through their Area representatives.

1.3 Information Services Guidelines

While the General Service Office [GSO] serves all the Groups in all the Areas of Al-Anon UK & Eire, it was recognized by the fellowship that Groups or Areas might come together to establish local Information Services with the purpose of carrying the Al-Anon message to the suffering families and friends of alcoholics. Guidelines for Local Al-Anon Information Services [UK13] is a two page document that sets out basic guidance for establishing and operating a local information service and explains how it should operate within the wider fellowship. The guidelines makes clear that Information Services exist, first and foremost, to disseminate information about Al-Anon and have no authority or structural role in relation to Groups, Districts or Areas.

1.4 Al-Anon Information Service History

The Al-Anon Information Centre was established in 1975 and based in Westmoreland Street to support the groups in the Éire region located in the Areas 14,15,16,19,23 and 29. In 1986 the Al-Anon Family Groups Information Centre Ltd. was incorporated as a company and registered as a charity and relocated to Fleet Street. The Centre later moved to Capel Street. In 2018 the Areas that established the Al-Anon Information Centre agreed to change its operating name to the Al-Anon Information Service [AIS].

1.5 Purpose

In line with the UK13 Guidelines, the Al-Anon Information Service maintains an up-to-date list of group meetings in the Eire region, accessible through the Information Service's own website [www.alanon.ie] and provides an office that sells Al-Anon literature and deals with Public Information queries and operates an information-only telephone helpline, 12 hours a day – 365 days a year.

1.6 Resources

While the UK13 Guidelines acknowledge that paid staff might be required to operate a service, the Al-Anon Information Service relies entirely on unpaid volunteers to provide all its services. The fifteen Management Committee members and office volunteers contribute over 2000 hours a year. The forty-helpline volunteers contribute over 8000 hours a year. Typically in any year the Information Service sells Al-Anon literature to local groups and members to the value of €25,000 at no profit. The annual operating costs of over €20,000 are met by donations from local Members, Groups, Districts and Areas. It is policy of the AIS to donate funds, surplus to the prudent operation of the Information Service, to GSO.

2.0 REVIEW 1975-2015

2.1 Current Review

At the AGM in Amy 2020 it was agreed that the Management Committee would review the operations of the AI-Anon Information Service and prepare a report for the next meeting with the Area Representatives. As the services provided by the AIS to the Éire region to a large extent mirror the same services provided by GSO to all the regions in AI-Anon UK & Éire, the Management Committee review has focused on the purpose of the AI-Anon Information Service and the benefits it provides to the Members and public in the 6 Areas in Ireland that support it, when compared to the service GSO provides to all the 30 Areas in AI-Anon UK & Éire

2.2 Previous Reviews

Since UK13 guidelines were formulated and the Information Centre in Dublin was established in 1975, the world has changed profoundly, especially in the way information is communicated, helplines are operated and in the way retail operates. While the Information Service has continually evolved and improved to meet these changes, its overall purpose and operation has not been reviewed in any comprehensive way in over 6 years. Previous Reviews in 2010 and 2013, while extensive in nature, focused on particular aspects of the Information Service without considering the wider context of AI-Anon UK & Éire.

2.3 2010 Ad-Hoc Committee Review

In 2010 an Ad-Hoc Committee reviewed the operation of the Information Service in terms of the various executive board, management committee and volunteer roles. The review focused on responsibilities attached to each role and but gave no consideration to specific Information Service activities.

2.4 2013 ICT Review Group

In 2012 a committee was established to further examine the governance and operation of the AI-Anon Information Centre. Reflecting the rapid pace of technological change in our world, the committee designated itself as the ICT [Information and Communications Technologies] Review Group and focused on how technology could be used to assist the volunteers to communicate with AI-Anon Members and the public. It focused on the office hardware, the helpline and website and finalized its report for the 2013 AGM. The Management committee over 2014 and 2015 set about rebuilding the service using where possible all the potential of new cloud based IT services.

2.5 AIS 1975-2000

Prior to the establishment of the Information Centre in 1975, the services it provides would have been provided by the GSO in London and the 6 Areas in Ireland would have been like any of the other 24 AI-Anon UK & Éire Areas located in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. The fact that the GSO was located in a different country, that also used a different currency, made it expensive and difficult for people in Ireland to access the services of GSO.

Anyone who wanted to buy literature, learn about AI-Anon or find out about meeting times and locations, had to write to or phone the GSO office in London. At the time the cost of a stamp or a phone call to London would have far exceeded the cost of a stamp or phone call to an office in Ireland. In order to purchase literature, having obtained a literature catalogue and price list, the purchaser had to confirm with GSO the cost of postage to Ireland, had to purchase a sterling bank draft and post it to GSO. At the time Irish personal cheques would not have been accepted in London and credit cards would not have been common. Postage costs for sending literature to Members in Ireland would have been higher than those paid by Members in the UK.

Clearly the case at the time for establishing a Local Information Service was very compelling and it made a lot of sense for Areas 14,16,19,23 and 29 to jointly support it. While the Local Information Service was duplicating the services of GSO, it was doing them in a way that made them cheaper and more accessible to the fellowship in Ireland. Between 1975 and 2000, despite Ireland and the UK being part of the evolving European Union, the continued difference in the cost of local and international postal and phone call rates would have meant that local Information Service continued to provide real advantages to the Members and public in Ireland.

2.6 AIS 2001-2014

Between 2000 and 2015 the emergence of the world wide web and email communications transformed both the GSO and the AIS. GSO developed a comprehensive website that contained Public Information, details of all Group meetings in Ireland and the UK, including map information, a web-store where literature could be ordered and paid for and a separate Members area. Due to constraints in financial resources and expertise, the AIS developed a much simpler website, with minimal Public Information, no web-store and a simple typed list of all Irish Group meetings.

With the widespread adoption of computers for work and communication, email increasingly became the easiest way for Members and the public to communicate both with the GSO and the AIS. At the same time the deregulation of the European telecommunications market, meant phone calls to the UK landlines became a lot cheaper. These cheaper calls and the widespread adoption of e-mail meant that communicating with the AIS was no longer easier or cheaper than communicating with the GSO for Members and the public in Ireland.

As the office AIS only opens Monday to Friday 10:30 to 14:30 the phone service up to 2015 was very limited and unsatisfactory when compared to the 12 hour a day – 365 day a year service provided by GSO at the time. Outside weekday office hours an answering machine was used to record messages. At weekends a recorded message gave the mobile contacts of two volunteers who could answer caller queries. Callers were often reluctant to leave any messages.

For literature however, the AIS however still provided advantages to the Irish Members as it sold literature priced in euros, available for collection from the Dublin office or posted throughout Ireland at postal rates less than those charged by GSO. The AIS charged a flat postal fee of €5.00 for all orders irrespective of value whereas GSO charged £2.50 for orders up to £10, £7.50 for orders from £10 to £50 and £15 for orders over £50. For all orders the AIS still relied on payments by cash, postal orders or personal cheque and did not process any card payments.

3.0 REVIEW 2015-2021

3.1 Cloud Services

Following on from the 2013 ICT Review, the AIS Management Committee in 2014 and 2015 oversaw the adoption of new cloud IT services in order to create a more user friendly, effective and flexible working environment for volunteers. Office 365 was used for emailing and file management, Vend for stocktaking and invoicing, Xero for book keeping and annual accounts and PhonePulse Cloud IVR for managing helpline calls. These new Cloud IT services did not directly change in any way the services that the AIS provided to Members or the public, but their adoption behind the scenes was considered essential to improving the overall quality and flexibility of the Public Information, Helpline and Literature services. While adoption of cloud services has provided clear improvements to the operation of the individual services, the lack of integration between the separate Cloud services has nevertheless created additional back office work for volunteers.

3.2 AIS Website

The two significant public changes to the AIS service in 2014 and 2015 were the launching of the new website and helpline. The new website was devised to replace the simple older one with one that was similar to the GSO website in content. The new website used a Wordpress template that was optimized for viewing on all modern smartphone, tablets and PC's. No payment to any web design company was made for the design and implementation of the new website with all the work being provided by two volunteers in their own time. As with the previous version the website did not contain a web-store, but a store page was created from where a PDF literature order form could be downloaded. In 2019 a PayPal button was added to allow for payments with credit and debit cards for the first time. The GSO website was subsequently completely redesigned, thanks to a generous legacy in 2018, and the new website was also optimized for viewing on all modern devices.

3.3 AIS Meetings Information

Once established the new AIS website required little updating, other than occasional changes to the Meetings page. As long as the changes were relatively few, it was easy to ensure that the AIS Meeting page information was an accurate duplicate of the AI-Anon UK & Éire Meeting page information. In the last year however, frequent closures and changes to meetings brought about by Covid-19, meant the information could no longer be updated accurately and the map and listing for meetings on the AIS Meetings page was replaced with a direct link to the AI-Anon UK & Éire website Meetings page in 2020. The 5 page PDF listing of Irish Meetings is currently the only meetings feature the AIS website offers over the GSO website.

3.4 Local Group Meeting Information

As noted in UK13 Guidelines for Information Services, a local service has no authority or structural role in relation Groups, Districts or Areas. While the AIS website provides lists of Irish meetings, the AIS is in no way involved with the registration of the Groups that run the meetings and the Groups, although requested to, are not required to notify the AIS of any changes to meeting details. The AIS only learns of meeting changes in an ad-hoc fashion. Having the same information on two different websites does create the potential for errors and confusion.

3.5 Regional Helpline

At the time the helpline was launched in 2015 many queried the logic of setting up a helpline when AI-Anon UK & Éire already operated one in the UK that could be extended into the Éire region. While availing of an existing professionally run helpline seemed like an obvious solution, it had at the time the disadvantage that Irish Members would not be able to volunteer for the UK based helpline. Providing service is a critical part of recovery in AI-Anon and many Members in the Éire region welcomed the opportunity to participate in operating the helpline. There was also a belief that callers to the new helpline might be confused by talking to someone from outside their own region.

3.6 AIS Helpline

As with the website, the helpline was launched in 2015 to duplicate the helpline provided by GSO for the 24 Areas in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. This meant the helpline needed to operate 12 hours a day, 365 days a year. Despite reservations at the outset that sufficient volunteers would be available in the 6 Areas to operate the local helpline, allowing volunteers to take calls from their own homes ensured enough volunteers were available. The annual training of volunteers was undertaken using the exact same material devised by GSO for the helpline it operates. The helpline handles roughly 1500 calls a year of varying duration but has the capacity to deal with up to 10,000 calls.

3.7 AIS Helpline System

As the AIS office phone number up to 2015 appeared on all literature and posters (01-873 2699) it was decided to use this as the new 2015 helpline number. At the time many mobile phones could not call lo-call or free phone numbers but calls to local landlines were cheap or free as part of bundles. A telecommunications company (Phone Pulse Ltd) provided an off the shelf cloud based telephony system that could be configured to automatically redirect helpline calls to volunteers' landlines or mobiles according to the volunteer weekly schedule. A fixed fee annual fee of €2,500 was agreed for renting this service that included bundles of free landline and mobile minutes for redirecting the helpline calls to volunteer's landlines or mobiles at no extra cost to the helpline caller or volunteer.

3.8 Al-Anon UK & Éire Group Contact

The Al-Anon UK & Éire helpline operated by GSO has a UK free phone number 0800 0086 811 that can be reached from Ireland by dialing 00 353 800 0086 811 but UK landline call charges apply. The Al-Anon UK & Éire helpline has always had a clear practice of providing a contact number for each of the 800 Groups [of which roughly 200 are located in the Éire Region] to allow newcomer callers contact a group directly. This became particularly useful during Covid-19 when changes to venue times and locations were frequent. GSO, as part of the annual Group registration process, collects the up to date contact numbers.

3.9 AIS Group Contact

The AIS helpline does not have access to the Group records of GSO and cannot give callers to the AIS helpline a Group contact number for Groups in the Areas that support the AIS. During Covid-19 when callers needed to obtain the most up to date information about meetings that were subject to frequent changes, the AIS helpline was not able to provide this group information to callers and this severely impacted the quality of the Helpline service provided by the AIS.

3.10 AIS Literature

With a general increase in online shopping, especially under Covid-19, the lack of an integrated web-store on the AIS website, similar to the web-store on the GSO website, makes purchasing literature from the AIS an inconvenient and disjointed experience. To place an order requires downloading an order form, calculating the cost of the order, emailing or posting the order form back and posting or making an online PayPal payment. Matching payments to orders is also a challenge for volunteers. AIS Al-Anon literature is required to be sold at no profit so that the AIS and GSO literature list prices have to match roughly allowing for currency fluctuations. A 7% discount is provided by GSO to the AIS to cover administrative costs of buying and selling the literature but other than that no mark-up or profit is provided by the annual sales that until Covid-19 amounted to over €25,000 a year. The investment required to upgrade the AIS website to match the click and pay user-experience quality of the GSO service is hard to justify for the relatively low volume of sales.

3.11 Literature Postal Rates

The general increase in on-line shopping and email usage has also had consequences for postal rates. The postal and courier services are now focused on delivering parcels instead of letters and parcel rates have risen substantially. The AIS currently has a flat fee of €8.50 for all orders irrespective of value. In comparison the GSO £7.50 charge for orders up to £50 are no higher and for orders under £10 the GSO £2.50 charge is actually cheaper.

3.12 Literature VAT rates

The Irish VAT rate for leaflets is 9% and for posters is 23%. As with the web-store issue, the complexity and cost involved in collecting the VAT on leaflets and posters and paying Irish Revenue has been hard to justify given the relatively low value of leaflet and poster sales when compared to books, so the AIS currently does not charge VAT on leaflets and posters. Before the UK left the EU there was uncertainty about how purchasing literature through GSO might be affected by issues of VAT and customs. It clear however now that books can be purchased from GSO without having to pay any additional VAT, as books in both Ireland and the UK have a VAT rate of 0%. GSO charges 20% UK VAT on leaflets and posters. Were GSO to register for Irish VAT with Irish Revenue it could sell leaflets and posters to Irish customers and charge the Irish VAT at the point of sale.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 AIS Reconfiguration

Since the Al-Anon Information Service was established in 1975 changes in technology, communications and transport that have greatly enabled GSO to improve its services to all 30 Areas in Al-Anon UK & Eire regardless of international borders and currencies. The clear additional benefits the AIS provided to the 6 Irish Areas between 1975 and 2000 have been slowly reduced as the services and reach of GSO have gradually improved.

The Management Committee have given serious consideration to the continued logic of having services managed locally in our region by volunteers when Al-Anon UK & Éire already has a professionally run and well resourced GSO operating identical services that the region also contributes financially to.

4.2 Helpline only AIS

The detailed review and comparison of the individual information services the AIS and GSO currently provide also examined the option that the AIS could continue its' operation in a reduced form that still retained some local services, in particular the Helpline. A regional helpline allows callers to talk to someone who lives in their region.

While the scope of services provided locally could be reduced to just a helpline, the legal responsibilities and financial costs of a registered charity and company required to oversee a helpline would not be significantly less than the costs of the current AIS. The Irish helpline Parentline was studied to gauge the level of governance and administration that would be required for a comparable helpline only charity in Ireland. A locally operated helpline would still lack integration with GSO Group contacts and helpline volunteers would still be unable to provide callers with Group contact information.

4.3 Helpline Reconfiguration

Any decision to reconfigure the delivery of services in the Ireland region would need to give some consideration to the continued operation of the Region's helpline. To provide a 12 hour a day – 365 day a year helpline in the Éire Region a number of options could be tested or adopted by GSO on a temporary basis pending further evaluation

- Separate Éire Region helpline operated by local volunteers using existing Phone Pulse system
- Separate Éire Region helpline operated by local volunteers using alternative system
- Single Al-Anon UK & Éire helpline for all Regions using volunteers from all Regions. Calls to 01-8732699 automatically redirected to +44 800 0086 811

The nearly forty current Éire Region helpline volunteers who work 4 hours per week, would first have to be consulted individually on what basis they would like to continue volunteering. Typically Members volunteer for about two years at a time. The last five years have established clearly that there is very strong support among Members in the Éire region for the helpline and all vacancies on the helpline have been filled. The six Areas in the Éire region are well placed to provide significant volunteer support to whatever helpline emerges from the reconfiguration process. It would be preferable if the regional aspect of the helpline could be retained in any eventual reconfiguration of services.

The latest Cloud based telephony systems can easily receive and redirect calls across national borders at very minimal costs should that option be required. The +353-1-8732699 number is no longer tied to any physical office address and can be easily incorporated into any cloud service. The Éire Region's volunteers could provide help that could benefit all regions in Al-Anon UK & Eire.

4.4 Office

It should be noted that the current office environment and equipment are no longer suitable. The current first floor office, while ideally located for public transport on Capel Street, is nevertheless not practical for access or deliveries as there is no lift and the stairs are very steep. The two 6 year old computers in the office are also beyond their useful service life and require immediate replacement. Considerable further investment in Cloud IT training and integration would also be required to sustain a local service and that assumes volunteers can be found to undertake the training and management roles.

4.5 Closure Recommendation

The Management Committee's clear conclusion, having conducted a thorough review of the AI-Anon Information Service, is that the information services required by the Éire Region are now better provided directly and exclusively by GSO, notwithstanding the benefits a regional helpline might offer. The Management Committee, having had extensive experience of running the AI-Anon Information Service, are not only of the view that there is no longer any conclusive need for a local information service office operating in parallel to GSO, but that the removal of the local information service office is the best way to ensure the continued quality and improvement of the information services required by Members and Groups in the Éire Region of AI-Anon UK & Éire. The fellowship can look forward to significant benefits and improvements in information services due to economies of scale and increased simplicity and focus in organizing of information services.

4.6 Regional Services

The closure might mean the loss of some local elements, such as a region only meeting list, a region only helpline and the convenience of making payments through euro instead of sterling. The benefits however of having a more focused, streamlined and better-resourced service operated directly from GSO need to be balanced against any potential downside. Even a single information source GSO could incorporate regional components into its service. The old GSO website had a separate list of meetings in the London Area available on its meeting page. The future of any helpline in the Éire region will require more detailed consideration.

4.7 Gratitude

The replacement of the local AI-Anon Information Service would no doubt raise issues of local pride. The Management Committee would like to stress that it is not because the AI-Anon Information Service has failed that it needs to close. On the contrary it is because of the continued success of the AI-Anon UK & Éire fellowship and the success of GSO that the AI-Anon Information Service is no longer required. The AIS has provided an excellent service for over 46 years at a very modest cost to the fellowship relying principally on the considerable volunteering efforts of local Members. It has played a critical part in supporting AI-Anon Family Groups in our Region, at a time when it was neither viable nor possible for GSO to do so effectively. The enormous debt of gratitude that the fellowship owes to all volunteers, both past and present, cannot be overstated.

4.8 Area Decision

The decision on the future of the AI-Anon Information Service lies solely with the six Areas that support it. This report and its' recommendation are being presented by the Management Committee to the Local Area Representatives for discussion and consideration by the Local Area Committees and Groups at the local Assemblies that will take place this autumn. Should the Areas agree that GSO is best placed to provide the services in our Region, the Management Committee advise that the earliest suitable date for closure of the AI-Anon Information Service is the end of December 2021 in line with the end of the Charity Regulator's and Company Registration Office's reporting year for Family Groups Information Centre Ltd. the registered charity that operates the AI-Anon Information Service.

4.9 Summary

The information services the AIS currently provides, are very similar to the information services GSO provides with some notable critical deficiencies

- AIS Literature is not sold through a standard easy to use web-store
- AIS Helpline has no access to GSO Group contact records to help callers
- AIS Group meeting information can be inaccurate and out of date

Maintaining the existing Al-Anon Information Service in its current form or in some reconfigured form is not a simple or cost-neutral option. Maintaining a local information service will require additional investment of precious resources, consisting of both donations and volunteers' time, above and beyond that required for normal day to day operations. Additional resources would include:

- Upgrade of Literature web-store
- Relocation to an office with safer and better access
- Two new computer systems to replace out of date machines
- Training of new volunteers for Cloud IT services
- Professional support costs for integration and ongoing support of Cloud IT services

Were all information services currently available in the Ireland region to be provided solely through GSO, it could have benefits for the wider fellowship by increasing donations to GSO and simplifying the lines of communications between GSO and the 6 Areas Éire Region. Some potential benefits would be:

- GSO increased annual donations of over €20,000 that are currently used to fund the local AIS
- GSO Helpline could recruit volunteers from the Éire region
- Group Meeting information accuracy and access improved by having one single source

The GSO service model, as currently configured, were the Al-Anon Information Service to close could have some disadvantages for the Ireland region which will need to be addressed. These possible disadvantages are:

- Literature purchases in Euro to avoid exchange rate charges might no longer be possible
- Irish callers to the Éire region helpline callers could be put through to volunteers in other parts of the UK and this may cause confusion among callers
- The regional A4 meeting list for Ireland might not be available on GSO website

The Management Committee's clear conclusion having conducted a thorough review of the Al-Anon Information Service is that:

- Developments in technology and communications mean that information services are better provided from a single location. The conditions that previously required the provision of information services locally no longer exist.
- The continued existence of the Al-Anon Information Service may hinder future improvements to the information services in the Éire region as financial and volunteer resources will be split between two overlapping information services rather than combined.
- GSO is best placed to provide directly and exclusively the information services required in the Éire region

Report prepared by Management Committee Al-Anon Information Service - August 2021

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