As this issue of the BJSE will be coming out near Christmas, the season of goodwill, it may be appropriate to mention some of the features that give the SENCo-Forum a sense of community – albeit a ‘virtual’ one. Readers of this journal will be familiar with the discussions about major current issues on the Forum, and these constitute the main content of the messages exchanged. But there are also messages that show that the Forum represents a significant source of mutual support at a more personal level. Some of this kind of interchange obviously occurs in direct messages between the members concerned. However, when members do not know who can respond to a particular need for support, they address Forum members in the whole mailing list. In the following, I have obviously been concerned to maintain the confidentiality of individuals’ contributions.

There are many examples of mutual support. On one occasion, in the context of comments on an issue, a member mentioned that they had been in hospital following an accident. The person concerned was a long-standing member of the Forum, and many members sent messages of sympathy. In another instance, a SENCo sent a message at about nine o’clock in the evening about a situation in their school which they were finding intolerable. ‘Can someone give me some moral support?’ the message started, and then described how a school in special measures was sweeping away the support system for pupils with special needs, and so undoing the successful system which the SENCo had developed. The SENCo felt that the only solution was to give notice to leave. By lunch-time on the following day, there was a response from a SENCo, who had also been through a difficult time in a school in special measures. He reminded the first SENCo that everyone was feeling blue near the end of term, and that for all SENCos, there was the reward of pupils responding to help. But he also acknowledged that there was a point at which one had to move to another school, where it was possible to make a more effective contribution. Occasionally a member sees the Forum as the kind of supportive context that they may lack at a particular moment. In one message, a special needs teacher in a school let off steam about a particularly frustrating experience at school, but the message ended with ‘ta for the moan, feel free to delete this’.

Participants also feel that they can call on support for more prosaic needs. During one Christmas holiday, a member sent out an SOS concerning a technical term on which a course assignment was required against a deadline. The problem was that they had forgotten what the term meant. In a short time a number of responses had provided detailed information which could not have been obtained through the normal channels since libraries were closed for the holiday. Another participant was applying for a SENCo post, and wanted advice about topics which might arise during the impending interview. Several messages provided suggestions. A little later the person reported that the interview had been successful, and members sent congratulations. There are also requests for technical advice about computer matters, which evoke responses from members who have the relevant expertise.

During the summer holidays a more zany element tends to appear. A whole range of jokes of varying levels of hilarity is exchanged, which could easily provide an anthology in themselves. Some members even send messages from their holiday locations overseas. Others are self-conscious about admitting that they continue to look at their email inboxes when on holiday. One amusing interchange of messages was about visualising what the respective participating members actually looked like. Paradoxically, this exchange of messages underlined the ‘virtual-ness’ of the Forum. But some holiday messages bring members urgently back to work-related matters. One SENCo needed to complete a special needs policy by the start of term, and was overwhelmed to find that there were members who were willing to provide help while away from school.

As the autumn term approaches, the messages revert to more serious matters. One member even expressed a concern that all further joking should stop. However, others responded that a little continued light relief was what they needed to cope with the current pressures of work. This kind of interchange illustrates the extent to which the Forum is owned by its members. There have been occasional instances where a member questioned the appropriateness or political correctness of another’s message. One response countered that the Forum could be regarded as a school staff room, in which members could be confident that no hurt was implied in the way individuals expressed themselves. On one occasion, the Forum Advisory Group (which has a majority of Forum user representatives) suggested that members might prefer it if discussion of any given topic should not predominate over a longer period – particularly because topics recurred over the longer term in any case. Certain members felt that such a suggestion represented a restriction on the use of the Forum, but more supported the recommendation. The problem has not arisen since, and so this perhaps is an instance of how the Forum manages itself.

Forum members have occasionally mentioned to me that this SENCo-Forum column does not reflect the range of message interchanges that occur on the Forum. I hope the above provides a wider – though still incomplete – picture.

Klaus Wedell, for the BECTA special needs team: Chris Stevens (manager) and Terry Waller (projects officer).

Further details about the Forum and how to join are available from Jason_Douglas@becta.org.uk or from the Special Needs Administrator, BECTA, Milburn Hill Road, Science Park, Coventry CV4 7JJ. Tel: 02476 416994; Fax: 02476 411418.