

**Cotswold Link u3a network**  
**Minutes of half yearly meeting held on 18 March 2023**  
**at Woodmancote Village Hall near Bishops Cleeve**

**Present:**

Sue Russell (chair), Ann Kelly (treasurer), Marion Collighan (secretary), Jenny Harrison (committee member), Susan Gibson (committee member + Cam, Dursley & District). Chris Wardle (Cheltenham), Alan Russell (Worcester), Theresa Howard & Mike Byrne (Bromsgrove), David Keeling & Nicky Neill (Evesham & District), Sally Whyte (Pershore), Paul + Susan Grierson (Churchdown), Duncan Fraser (Tewkesbury), Phil Hawthorn & Paul McDonald (Winchcombe), Roger Steer (Thornbury), Gillian Thompson, Margaret Cleverley & Valerie Hayward (Bishops Cleeve), Denis Riley & Clive Harper (Gloucester), Andy Castro & Mike Townsend (Ledbury), Roy Atkins & Bill Culshaw (Malvern).

**1) Apologies for absence**

There were voting delegates representing 14 u3as out of the 26 Cotswold Link members, which is 54%, making the meeting quorate.

Apologies had been received from: Chris Hucker (Hereford), Lesley Brooke and Mike Goodwin (Leominster), Jim Christie (Ross-on-Wye), Richard Phillips (Malvern), Carmel Burton (Tetbury), Richard Bedford & Judith Silverwood (Stroud), Elizabeth Reeves (North Cotswolds), Les Hazelwood (Droitwich), Roger Streatfield (Churchdown), Allan Walmsley (Regional Trustee West Midlands), Susan Parker (Regional Trustee South West).

**2) Acceptance of minutes of half yearly meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2022**

No issues were raised with the minutes from the previous half yearly meeting in October 2022. Acceptance was proposed by Jenny Harrison and seconded by Mike Byrne. The minutes were approved with 1 abstention.

**3) Matters arising from the minutes**

Mike Byrne advised that Bromsgrove had been continuing to share open meetings over Zoom with Evesham and Droitwich over the winter and early spring (January to April).

**4) News from the committee**

a) Special Interest Day 2023

Marion advised that the flyer for the Special Interest Day on 29<sup>th</sup> June has already been distributed to member u3as. The event will take place in the Pavilion in Cheltenham and will cost £28 per person. The theme is "Art and Patronage". There will be 4 speakers, with lunch and a hot drink on arrival. Some registrations have already been received. U3as are encouraged to advertise to their members and suggest people apply early.

b) Liz Thackray's visit to SW region 2023

Marion advised that Liz Thackray will be visiting Gloucestershire and Wiltshire from 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>th</sup> June. She will spend the Monday morning in Cheltenham then come to Bishops Cleeve in the afternoon. On Tuesday morning she will visit Cirencester before moving on to Wiltshire in the afternoon. We are all hoping that the visit will be able to go ahead this year, as in 2022 it had to be cancelled due to the extreme heat.

c) Treasurer's Peer support group

Ann advised that the peer support group for Treasurers has started to meet over Zoom. She now has details of most Treasurers, so can contact them directly. David Keeling mentioned that he thought the meetings were very useful. The next discussion subject is the use of Beacon and in preparation for this, Ann has managed to get a place for herself on the course provided by the Beacon team.

Chris Wardle mentioned that she thinks a support group for Membership Secretaries would be very helpful. Bill Culshaw expressed the view that this sort of exchange of information was always useful.

Marion advised that now Beacon is fully functional for Cotswold Link we can hold information on any group of role holders and members can have access so that they can contact others within the groups that are set up. U3as will need to make sure she has the details of all the role holders so that they can take part.

**5) Report from the regional trustee for the West Midlands – Allan Walmsley**

Sue Russell read out a report from Allan Walmsley, as he was unable to be present at short notice for personal reasons.

“As I write this, I am 11 days away from Freedom Day – my successor as Trustee for the West Midlands will be announced on (or around) Monday 27 March. There are three very capable candidates, Chris Hucker, from Hereford u3a, and Jean Jackson and Tony Thomson, both from Lichfield u3a. Whilst this will leave me a little more time to devote to the role of National u3a Vice Chair, it will also be a sad moment for me as I pass on the West Midlands baton after almost three years. When I took over in October 2020, we were already in the grip of Covid, and many u3as faced an uncertain alternative of either hibernation or grappling with technology. Thankfully most u3as have survived and started to restore their membership numbers but Covid has left a serious legacy. Even though we have only lost two small u3as in the West Midlands, others have been left with a distinct lack of energy and enthusiasm, and a cautious approach to face to face has meant that attendance levels are still low. Another impact of Covid has been the emergence of a number of commercial online offerings, all recognising the valuable profile and demographics of u3a members. How many members have been lost to alternative offerings, we will never know, but it is clear that already, u3as are having to work harder to attract and retain new members. We will have

a better ideas of overall membership numbers after April, when u3as complete the annual registration process, but already we can see a patchy picture emerging with some very successful u3as attracting new members in substantial quantities, whilst others continue to struggle.

My tenure as Trustee has also enabled me to contact and meet many enthusiastic and able u3a chairs. Through my regular Friday Fireside chats, emails, and visits, I have become familiar with around 60 of the 83 u3as in the West Midlands, and without exception, our discussions have been welcoming, interesting and valuable – to me at least! Everyone wants to promote a well-managed u3a movement at all levels, and whilst some are content to manage their own affairs with little involvement, contact (or interference) from outside their local community, many others welcome the support and sharing culture of reciprocal arrangements with neighbouring u3as, and networks like Cotswold Link.

As Vice Chair, I will continue to promote networks and interchange at all levels between u3as. As the voluntary sector becomes more competitive and volunteering seems to become less fashionable, the future of the u3a movement will depend, in my view, more and more on u3as “joining the dots” and learning from and supporting each other. I hope my successor will think likewise, and I promise to promote that ethos during our handover period. I also hope that the practice of Fireside chats will continue, along with publication of the regional newsletter, the regional website, and restoration of a face to face regional conference in the future.

In the meantime, I would like to thank Sue, Marion and the Cotswold Link for their ongoing support to the movement and to supporting me during my period with West Midlands. I hope you will invite me to visit you in the future in my capacity as Vice Chair.”

## **6) Report from the regional trustee for the South West – Susan Parker**

Sue Russell read out a report from Susan Parker, as she was also unable to be present at short notice due to personal reasons.

“I am now 2½ years into my term and I find that my milage is increasing as I am able to get out and visit more Networks and u3as. I started during Covid which meant that almost everything that we did was either Zoom or Teams but I find face to face meeting so much more satisfactory as I’m sure you all do. I also travelled to Witney for the unveiling of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Quilt. The SW had 8 squares in the Quilt, 2 of them from Cotswold Link. I also attended the National Robot Challenge which was held in Churchdown and spent a very interesting day there. I hope that next year it will be well advertised and even more teams will enter and even more members will support the event.

Membership in the Region is picking up slowly as people become more confident about meeting in large groups but it has been slower in some of the smaller u3as

and unfortunately 3 have closed. However, new u3as have started up. Unfortunately, some of the smaller networks have disbanded, particularly in Cornwall which has a very scattered membership which makes u3as very independent. However, we are working on it and with support and advice from successful u3as like yours I have high hopes.

In June Liz Thackray will visit your part of the Region and I must thank everyone who has worked to put a programme together for her.

For the last two years we have moved the Regional meetings for Network Representatives from Zoom meetings to Hybrid Meeting using 3 different locations round the Region so that everyone has a chance of attending at least one and it is hoped before much longer we will be able to have Regional Conferences again in different locations to give as many members the opportunity to attend. I look forward to receiving all your ideas on topics and locations.

Have a wonderful day. I wish I was there.”

Sue then shared some thoughts and information she has as Chair of Network Link. Every 2 weeks she attends a National Headliners meeting. She can see that the workload of regional trustees and officers is enormous, certainly a full working week with often evenings and weekends as well. Liz Thackray is trying to move away from having regional trustees also chair u3a committees, as this is not necessary and will help with their workload.

As we were told after the National AGM, there is a proposal to move to a new structure for the Trust. This is to consist of a smaller Board made up of experts in the fields of legal, finance, etc. plus a council. In her role as Chair of Network Link Sue is part of a pilot council, along with the current regional trustees and others. One of the things she is pushing for is clarity on the role of the council. It seems that the Trust no longer seem to be pushing for a vote on this proposal at the 2023 AGM but will wait until 2024. Bill Culshaw commented he agrees that executive responsibility needs to be very clear.

Jenny Harrison asked if Sue knew of any planned capitation increases, as local committees need time to implement these in their u3as. Sue advised that she has passed on the question to Derek Harwood, the Treasurer of the Trust.

Val Hayward commented that National Office is getting top heavy. Sue replied that, whilst this might sometimes seem to be the case, it is actually very small with only about 24 staff. However, it is not always clear to u3as what the role of National Office is. There is a perception that the u3a is a hierarchy with National Office at the top. Sue explained that she would describe the u3a movement as a network, with National Office being one part of that network.

As a comparison it was mentioned that Cambridge u3a, which is not affiliated to

the Trust because it is based on the French model of u3a, has a much bigger staff than the Trust and charges higher subscriptions.

Mike Byrne commented that the direction the Trust has taken has not always been what members want. Help with documentation is valued but things like the new Logo are not. Sue replied that both Liz and Allan believe the Trust should get back to its core values.

Bill Culshaw commented that it was difficult to get people to join local u3a committees, as most members are only interested in the interest groups they have joined. He questions whether members are really interested in things like regional conferences.

Mike Byrne mentioned that “management speak” is also not welcome and does not help with communication. David Keeling expressed the view that events like this half yearly meeting were really helpful for communication.

**7) AOB**

Clive raised the issue of people asking what u3a means. Marion reminded that we are advised to explain what u3a does, rather than trying to answer the question directly.

**Date and time of next meeting**

The next half yearly meeting is scheduled to be hosted by Malvern u3a. They have begun investigations to set a suitable venue and date, targeting early October.

Signed..... Date .....