

Chair's report for 2019 - 2020

It's no exaggeration to say that this year has probably been one of the most difficult in East Grinstead U3A's 25 year history. Earlier in the year our U3A came perilously close to closing, due to a lack of success in recruiting a new Chair and Secretary. Fortunately, volunteers were found by the end of January, Linda Howard took over the post of Secretary and myself the post of Chair and the emergency was averted. Little did we realise that our honeymoon period on the committee would be so short lived as the dreaded Covid 19 appeared and all our lives changed dramatically. As lockdown was declared in March, the committee was faced with having to cancel all face to face activities. My special thanks must go to our Events Coordinator, Danielle Clarke, who had the unenviable task of cancelling all the events she had so carefully put together, including the 25th Anniversary Celebrations. My thanks also to Bob Smith who managed the postponement of this year's U3A holiday and arranged for it to be rescheduled in 2021.

At this point, I think we need to concentrate on what we have achieved, despite the awful Covid. Firstly, the committee, Group Leaders and members quickly embraced video conferencing technology and began holding meetings via Zoom - some of you may remember the Thunderbirds TV ad for Zoom ice lollies! At this time there are 11 interest groups regularly meeting via Zoom. Our committee meets via Zoom and our monthly speaker meetings have just started again via Zoom. During lockdown, Linda Howard set up our own Facebook page so that members could keep in touch. At the end of September, the Shakespeare Workshop ran very successfully using Zoom.

In addition to the 11 interest groups meeting via Zoom, it has been possible for our walking groups, Litter Matters Group and Water Activities Group to be able to restart their activities. Singing for Pleasure has also been able to restart by using a Covid safe venue.

Holding sessions online allows for some social interaction and is better than nothing, but it's no substitute for face to face meetings and is of no benefit to our members who either do not have internet access or do not wish to participate in Zoom sessions. Our committee has tried to involve all members, regardless of internet status, by encouraging Group Leaders to phone their members and by providing a paper and post option for newsletters and this AGM.

East Grinstead U3A has successfully switched to using Beacon, U3A's very own software programme which looks after membership, group records and mailing systems. Beacon removes much of the hard work and tedium of maintaining membership records and has helped David, our new Membership Secretary, very quickly get to grips with his new role. A huge thank you must go to John Wells for the hard work and time he has spent on the introduction of Beacon. We are

extremely fortunate to have someone with John's level of technical expertise on the committee.

Although our finances are healthy, our membership numbers have dropped slightly. This was expected, due to the pandemic, and follows a national trend within U3A. Currently our membership stands at 542 and I would like to thank all those who have faithfully renewed their membership during these very difficult times.

I should like to take this opportunity to say some farewells and 'thank you's'. Anne White, our previous Secretary, left the committee in January this year having served her three year, plus a few months term. I should like to thank her for her considerable contribution to the smooth running of the committee. John Wells stepped down from his role as Chair but continues to play a very important role on the committee, wearing three hats, Group Co-ordinator, Website Manager and Beacon Lead. He works tirelessly in these roles and has been a great help to me as the 'new girl'.

David Paterson, our previous Membership Secretary, left us in May this year and I should like to thank him too for the time he spent in the role. Sadly, Roy Adderley, our Archivist and Group Leader died earlier this year. He left a fantastic resource of U3A archive material that Mike Kilfiger, our Newsletter Editor, is hoping to include in future publications.

My first few months as Chair has been unusual, not least because for the first few months I only met most committee members on screen, rather than in person. As I've got to know my fellow committee members I can't fail to be impressed by their knowledge, wide range of talents and dedication to U3A. They all work very hard to make the East Grinstead U3A experience the best it can be for all members. I should like to express my sincere thanks to the team.

And finally, my thanks to you, the members and Group Leaders. Without you there simply wouldn't be an East Grinstead U3A and your continued support allows us to go from strength to strength. I'm so pleased and proud to be your Chair and hope to meet more of you in person in the not too distant future.

Sandra Webb