

How to Retain Your Current Members



u3as have been sharing ideas with each other and coming up with resources to help the movement retain and recruit members during this time and beyond. This series hosts these resources in a toolkit for u3a members to use when needed. Credit: Frances Berry

Introduction

Many u3as have been expending an enormous amount of time and energy on keeping their u3as alive during the pandemic. As ever, every u3a has its own unique approach. This guide attempts to pull together the experiences of u3as, many of which have been involved in the u3a Pathfinder project to trial and test ways of retaining existing members and recruiting new ones.

Broadly speaking, u3a strategies fall into six main areas:

- Contacting non-renewers
- Communication, communication, communication
- Multiplying social, general u3a and interest group opportunities online
- Technical support and help
- Subscription and payment issues

- Surveys, consultation and canvassing for new ideas

Due to Covid-19, member retention is more important than ever.

Whether you are currently thriving or surviving, we hope you will find some useful suggestions in this guide to help you retain your current members.

We will be collecting feedback to create an improved version for use by u3as. Your experiences of using the guide are of vital importance. Please email your suggestions for improvement to feedback@u3a.org.uk

Contacting non-renewers

Some u3as have deferred membership renewals for periods between a few months and a year. Sooner or later, however, you will need to ask your members to renew their subscriptions.

Judging by the experience of Pathfinder u3as, there is no substitute for making personal contact by telephone with people who have not renewed their membership. In the words of **Holmes Chapel and District u3a**:

“105 Of our 675 members had not renewed their membership (several months after the due date) I, as membership secretary, decided to telephone each one (which took about a month) From 675 members we (now) have 641, a net loss of 5%. There is no doubt that the loss rate would have been substantially higher if we had not been proactive in following people up.”

In the case of **Benfleet u3a**, telephone follow-up revealed that part of the problem was that some members couldn't download their renewal form:

“...by late June I had a list of the 15 members who had not renewed. I phoned each one and either talked to people or left messages. The commonest problem was lack of facilities for printing the renewal form. So, we hand delivered or posted forms to those people (as we had already done for the members we have who don't have computers). 9 of the 15 renewed.”

Before the pandemic, there was some anecdotal evidence of a 'revolving door' pattern where u3as recruited new members, but where such members don't renew their membership for a second year. Among Pathfinder u3as, **Islington u3a** interrogated its records and found that:

“...one of our most pressing problems is non-renewal after just one year of membership. Whilst our overall membership level is steady and we are still recruiting new members our non-renewal rate, we have decided, is too high even allowing for the current unusual circumstance of the pandemic.

Plymouth u3a has launched a review of the information that a new recruit receives. This is important because it was clear from feedback that the u3a was failing those members who join on-line and the u3a felt the issue had never been fully addressed.”

Communication, communication, communication

The most widespread strategy to encourage members to be loyal to their u3a is based on communication.

The majority of u3as have made the most strenuous efforts not just to maintain contact with members, but even to develop, extend and increase communications.

The picture that emerges from most Pathfinder u3as is that their newsletter has played a key role in keeping members involved and in touch. Sometimes, newsletters have been supplemented by more frequent bulletins or briefings. Sometimes the frequency of the newsletter has been increased. Quite often, the range of topics covered has grown to encompass any and every sort of content which entertains and interests members: quizzes, recipes, jokes, poetry, interest group reports etc.

Most u3as distribute their newsletter online, and, prior to the Pandemic, made paper copies available to members without an internet connection (or sometimes a printer) at their general meetings. During the lockdowns, postal and even delivery by hand for non-internet-enabled members seems to have become the norm.

In **Tunbridge Wells u3a:**

“Reaching members not on email has been difficult. They receive our Newsletter by post which, since the first lockdown, has been printed in colour (previously printed versions were in black and white). We also produced an edition in December (previously only each month from January to November).

We have ensured that each Newsletter contains things for those not online to do such as patterns for facemasks, quizzes, crosswords etc. The committee also telephoned all members who are not on email before Christmas. Many were elderly and seemed mildly surprised, though pleased, that we had done so.”

In **Easingwold and District u3a:**

“We have 17 members not on email and we deliver hard copy to them as we email our bulletin. We did introduce a weekly bulletin to support members at the beginning of lockdown, giving helpful ideas and telling what was possible support in the local area. Now we have reduced to monthly but we have made the decision to deliver hard copy to all members.....”

In **Crewe and Nantwich u3a:**

“Under the leadership of a new Editor, our Newsletter has expanded considerably both in terms of its length and the number of willing and talented contributors from the membership.”

In **Eastwood u3a:**

“The production of our monthly newsletter has included a variety of new projects such as ‘u3a eye’ a twice monthly photograph theme. Also an ‘online board games’ group and ‘virtual coffee mornings / quizzes’ being set up and shared.”

In **Pontesbury and Rhea Valley u3a:**

“Our publicity officer has worked with extraordinary energy and commitment to increase the contact we have with the membership. The frequency of the Newsletter increased from a monthly to a three-weekly cycle. This has been accompanied by new features designed to engage the interest of members such as the Third Page which has invited them to contribute around a series of set themes. There are also regular quizzes, jokes, riddles, and items from Interest Groups.”

The plethora of online general meetings, WhatsApp, Facebook groups, Zoom interest groups, emails and AGMs etc is summarised in the next section. Here, it may be worth pausing to think about telephone trees and similar means of communicating with members who are not online.

Regular telephone contact seems to be a key strategy for contacting offline members. This is potentially very time consuming for the volunteers – often from the committee – who do the contacting, all the more time consuming in large u3as.

Chepstow u3a has developed a Telephone Chatline to contact members. They found that the Chatline could become increasingly self-sustaining as members who were contacted volunteered to ring other members.

In the words of **Chepstow u3a:**

“As we prepared to go into lockdown in March we discussed our concerns about those of our members who didn’t have access to the internet, or who really didn’t use the internet, and lived alone. Our Membership secretary went through Beacon and identified those members who we felt were at risk of isolation and loneliness. Volunteers on the committee then phoned people on a weekly basis, rotating the list amongst the volunteers.

“Most people on the list were very happy to chat to someone once a week, some were too busy in their gardens or with other projects, some wanted to join the group of volunteers and chat to others on the list. Our membership secretary has expanded the list when we hear of a member who is struggling. Our Chatline has now been active for eight months and is a vital part of our communication with members.”

Multiplying social, general u3a and interest group opportunities

There is literally no end to the inventive, multifarious and ingenious ways that u3as have embraced online opportunities, mostly with great success. Who would have thought that a wine tasting group could be recast as an online u3a bar? Who would have imagined that attendance at AGMs or some interest groups could actually be increased when they take the form of Zoom rather than Face-to-Face meetings?

A handful of quotations from Pathfinder u3as will give a flavour of the ways that u3as have made themselves into virtual u3as to beat Covid-19 and maintain and develop their u3a community:

“Since December we have offered a virtual Coffee Morning to our members, which centres around a theme and includes PowerPoint presentations, contributions from groups and a ‘break-out’ session for a social chat. We have realised that this works better if we facilitate a specific topic or question. We aim to put on a programme of professional entertainment once a month via Zoom. Our main focus of attention has been on making our website more creative, attractive and interesting both for existing and potential new members.” – **Matlock and District u3a**

“Twice-monthly Speaker Meetings continued. Attendance is continuing to increase from 40+ to nearly 100. Fortnightly coffee mornings set up on Zoom alternate with Speaker Meetings. Breakout Rooms are used for chats. Brief film/comedy clips start coffee mornings as stimulus for conversation if needed. Some members only want to be with their friends in Breakout Rooms but we have resisted this and encourage them to meet other members.” – **Witney u3a**

“Our monthly open meetings with guest speakers re-started in October using Zoom and about half of our 22 interest groups also met using Zoom. Allowing member-to-member chat time before and after speaker meetings is much appreciated....we have recently started a second series of monthly meetings (talks/quizzes and presentations) as well as regular tea/cake/chat sessions. The use of breakout rooms allowing team quizzes has extra appeal to our members. We’ve also started monthly ‘themed’ photo competitions with small ‘liquid’ prizes including an intriguing one which features photos of specific parts of local buildings where there is no background to provide clues to the location!” – **Penicuik u3a**

“For some months we’ve produced a monthly YouTube video, an upbeat coverage of Hillingdon u3a developments, with a link sent to all online members……. A number of Groups are running virtual meetings via varying platforms, particularly Zoom. Group meetings are open to all local u3a members, and we encourage group members to invite their friends to attend.

“Zoom meetings mean that Interest Group business can continue to be effective. We continue to promote more Groups to undertake virtual meetings, using positive examples from our own u3a, or other u3as if we need to. As examples, our Family History Group is in process to run its first Zoom meeting, following the success of the first such meeting of the Local History Group, which attracted around 70 participants when historically only around 25 participated in the earlier in-hall meetings!” – Hillingdon u3a

Below is just a small selection of ideas gathered first-hand and from the u3a Keeping in touch Facebook group:

- **Carlton and Gedling u3a** jazzed up its wine tasting group calling it their u3a wine bar, inviting the whole membership, using break out rooms and adding YouTube clips for educational content and conversation, their new motto is ‘learn through drinking’
- A walking group buddy scheme whereby members go for walks in pairs has kept **Sherburn and Villages u3a** in touch
- **Ashburton u3a** gardening group have begun using WhatsApp to share images of plants, to share produce and plants and to organise staggered visits at hourly intervals to members’ gardens through the seasons.
- History and photography groups prepared local quizzes to be used when members are out exercising.
- Family history groups have started to share their research images of Birth Marriage and Death records in dedicated Facebook groups, for supportive commenting, which works better than in a normal face-to-face gathering.
- Photography groups have used Flickr to share with their group members
- A beginners’ drawing group launched using YouTube videos and zoom
- A new craft group began sharing members projects on WhatsApp, meeting on zoom and when allowed have workshops to demonstrate and practice new crafts.

Technical support and help

To take advantage of all the opportunities of digital, u3as have required a great deal of new learning, technical support and help. To retain members and include them in activities, committee members and volunteers who have learnt how to use Zoom,

WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook and other types of social media, have taught others in the true u3a ethos.

u3as have found that attitudes have changed towards technology. It may be a second-best, compared to face-to-face, yet it is an effective way to keep in touch and pursue interests.

Individual u3as progress with technology at very different rates, dependent on their members' proficiency and how many gurus and helpers they can enlist. However, observations from lockdown surveys in the South West region taken in March 2020 and then in December showed progress made in use of technology was staggering, thanks to hundreds of enthusiasts helping others to gain confidence and try out new things.

This self-help ethos is echoed in other regions. In the East Midlands, for example:

*“A member of the Committee has undertaken 1:1 training in the use of Zoom for those nervous of technology. A member of the Committee has contacted and supported ‘group contacts’ to keep in touch with their specific interest group members and has assisted with and supported the use of Zoom skills, where necessary. Members of the Committee have planned and delivered ‘newbie’ user and ‘etiquette’ Zoom sessions....The Committee has requested that any members who have expertise in internet / web-based publicity, become involved, where practicable.” – **Eastwood u3a***

In **Ledbury and District u3a**, in the West Midlands:

“We have a significant number of members with no IT, many of whom have taken the decision not to travel down this path. Consequently, the sub-group has included in its remit the development a buddy system – to facilitate the use of email communication (in particular), without disenfranchising any of its members. Buddies (further non-committee members) will disseminate email information by phone or as hard copies. As we progress with online engagement, will also aim to develop existing telephone groups (via buddies & existing/new groups), and to explore telephone zoom dial-in.”

In **Tunbridge Wells u3a** in the South East Region:

“We invited those who had joined since September 2019 to a virtual New Members’ Meeting. First, we had to introduce many of them to Zoom, itself a time-consuming process, but the meeting itself was a success. We were able to introduce some of the members to groups, but the obvious need was for social contact. As a result, we have set up the New Zoomers group (New members who are Zoom users). They have been meeting once a week for a chat over coffee or drinks and want to continue, though we are gradually integrating them into mainstream activities.”

In **Plymouth u3a**, the committee agreed to the compilation of a help video about downloading and using Zoom. This has meant that many members can communicate better with friends and family and within some groups.

In **Exmouth u3a**, the committee set up a sub group: a Technical Committee. This new committee investigated different systems and how it could help both the committee but importantly the membership of around 1000 members. Over the course of the Lockdown and the easing of restrictions the Technical Committee has helped over 75 individual members with technical issues, mostly by phone call.

Subscription and payment issues

Broadly speaking, encouraging membership renewal has two payment aspects:

- Reduction of subscriptions
- Making it easier to pay remotely.

Subscriptions are obviously a sensitive issue for each committee. Some u3as have maintained subscriptions at their normal, pre-Covid 19 level. Others have reduced subscriptions temporarily or introduced subscription holidays to compensate members for the loss of their normal full range of membership activities and/or in recognition of the reduction in u3a running costs in the absence of venue charges.

Whatever the decision on levels of subscription, u3as have moved to, or are speeding up the transition to, remote payment of subscriptions either online through bank transfer or PayPal, or through postal payment.

Surveys, consultation and canvassing for new ideas

Last, but by no means least, in the truly unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic, some committees have recognised the need to consult with members for ideas about how to keep their groups running, using surveys or questionnaires based on models provided by SurveyMonkey or developing their own. Indeed, there have been several requests on the Keeping in Touch Facebook group for examples of effective practice to help u3as who want to try and gather feedback and information from members, but don't know how to get started.

Seeking feedback can be incorporated as a regular committee action. The benefits are that it provides material for the committee to use for running their u3a, values members' views, encourages member involvement and discourages a culture whereby members are passive receivers who feel they can opt in and out of the u3a without commitment.

Some of the Pathfinder u3as are seeking to gather and respond to members' views.

To quote the Chairman of **Plymouth u3a**, by way of illustration:

“The first step in the recruitment review was, I felt, down to me as Chairman. My initial action was to contact all members who joined our u3a in the past 9 months or so and asked them what their first impressions were and how they felt we could improve things. Responses were very positive and as a result two of those people agreed to join three members of the committee to form a ‘recruitment sub-committee.’”

Tunbridge Wells u3a has chosen the survey route to gather feedback from members:

“We decided to find out more about our members by circulating an online questionnaire. Committee members held very different views about what should be included but eventually we agreed and the survey went out before Christmas.”

Conclusion

It seems self-evident that u3as will want their members to renew their membership.

The pressures of successive lockdowns and the disruption of our normal public meetings may have an impact on renewals. The experiences of u3as which are summarized and discussed in this guide suggest that there is a lot you can do to strengthen your u3a right now in order to retain your current members and to keep providing opportunities to learn and laugh together for a richer life.



u3as have been sharing ideas with each other and coming up with resources to help the movement retain and recruit members during this time and beyond. This series hosts these resources in a toolkit for u3a members to use when needed. Credit: Paul Martinez and Frances Berry

Swap Shop: Sharing ideas to retain your current u3a members

Introduction

This part of the u3a Retention and Recruitment Toolkit aims to enable u3as to swap ideas. It will be updated as new ideas are generated and shared. This makes it different from all the other tools in the Retention and recruitment toolkit.

In order for the Swap Shop to stay open, we need your ideas!

It may be that you have already tried or are trying some of these ideas. Tell us what you have tried.

Would you encourage others to do the same thing? Do we need to send a warning about possible difficulties or unexpected issues or problems that you experienced?

The ideas and experiences have been arranged in 6 broad categories:

1. Contacting non-renewers
2. Communication, communication, communication
3. Going online: multiplying social, generic and interest group opportunities online
4. Technical support
5. Subscriptions and payments
6. Other

Bearing the context in mind, it might be worth stating a few reservations:

- The experiences which follow are in no particular order of priority.
- The experiences and ideas have been reported by different people in 20 u3as and lightly edited for spelling etc. There are therefore some differences in style and nuance
- At the risk of stating the obvious, they are possibilities, not commandments. You and your committee are best placed to know what will work best for your u3a.

Welcome to the Swap Shop.

Please look out for ideas that you want to use and share your own experiences and ideas. Please send ideas that you want to share with other u3as to feedback@u3a.org.uk. The aim is to inspire and stimulate our collective thinking.

Contacting non-renewers

“As Membership Secretary I took the decision to contact the non-renewing members by telephone...In summary, from 675 members at 1st July we now have 641, a net loss of 5%. There is no doubt that the loss rate would have been substantially higher if we had not been proactive in following people up. From discussions in the large and small Pathfinder groups it would appear that this is a very good outcome taking into account of the impact of Covid, particularly on indoor activities.” Holmes Chapel & District u3a

“We will phone every member who does not renew.” Pontesbury & Rea Valley u3a

“Last year we had 131 members and this year we’ve retained 116. This was achieved by personal follow-up phone calls.” Penicuik and District u3a

“Our membership (currently 298) runs from July and by late June I had a list of the 15 members who had not renewed. I phoned each one and either talked to people or left messages. The commonest problem was lack of facilities for printing the renewal form. So, we hand delivered or posted forms to those people (as we had already done for the members we have who don’t have computers) 9 of the 15 renewed. The other 6 had good reasons why they did not renew such as ill health or change of circumstance while two were newish members who had not been able to join in anything because of Covid restrictions so were leaving it for now to re-join sometime in the future.” Benfleet u3a

“We have 279 members with 27 non-renewals but 21 new members. Our Treasurer is currently engaged in making telephone contact with all non-renewers.” Easingwold and District u3a

“If members don’t renew their membership then we telephone (irrespective of whether they have email or not) in order to talk over reasons why they haven’t renewed.” Ponteland U3A

“We found that those members who chose not to renew were, primarily, members who had only recently joined.” South East London u3a

Communication, communication, communication

“The two interest group coordinators on the committee have been in regular contact with all the groups. We have established how many are active via zoom or other methods and have urged the less active to groups to try alternatives to face-to-face meetings. We have urged group leaders to maintain contact with all members. Committee members have kept in phone contact with those we feel are isolated.” Pontesbury & Rea Valley u3a

“As we prepared to go into lockdown in March, we discussed our concerns about those of our members who didn’t have access to the internet, or who really didn’t use the internet, and are living alone. Our Membership secretary went through Beacon and identified those members who we felt were at risk of isolation and loneliness. Volunteers on the committee then phoned people on a weekly basis, rotating the list amongst the volunteers. Most people on the list were very happy to chat to someone once a week.....some wanted to join the group of volunteers and chat to others on the list. Our membership secretary has expanded the list when we hear of a member who is struggling. Our Chatline has now been active for eight months and is a vital part of our pastoral role to our members.” Chepstow u3a

“Support to our members via face-to-face meetings (when restrictions allowed) by telephone, email and zoom. An initiative for members to meet at a ‘coffee morning’ (when restrictions allowed) at local venues was started. This was to update members on what groups were doing, to get together and share information.” Eastwood and District u3a

“We are fortunate in our u3a as only 3% of our members do not use e-mail/the Internet. However, we were aware that whilst these members received a printed copy of our newsletter, they were not able to join us at our weekly sessions via video conferencing so a few of our committee volunteered to telephone these members and this has been maintained throughout.” Exmouth and District u3a

“We provide a monthly Newsletter sent to all members through Beacon with positive news of group activities and which includes a reminder to check out the website! 30 out of 56 Groups are running virtual meetings or are active through emails and telephone calls.” Matlock Area u3a

“We have a significant number of members with no IT, many of whom have taken the decision not to travel down this path [leading to] the development a buddy system – to facilitate the use of email communication (in particular), without disenfranchising any of its members. Buddies (further non-committee members) will disseminate email information by phone or as hard copies. As we progress with online engagement, will also aim to develop existing telephone groups (via buddies and existing/new groups), and to explore telephone zoom dial-in.” Ledbury and District u3a

“We knew that once a month for our bulletins would not be sufficient to keep our membership informed about how and where to get essential supplies, how to get help and to keep up to date with a constantly changing situation. So, we decided to send out weekly bulletins and a number of our members wrote to thank us for keeping them so well informed. We maintained these until the end of August when we decided that we would send them out when needed.” Exmouth and District u3a

“Regular contact is made with existing members by email (or telephone if they haven’t got internet) and monthly newsletter to make sure that they are made to feel a part of the organisation and that their membership is valued. Convenors make regular contact with their group members if they are unable to run the group in times of Covid lockdown.” Ponteland u3a

“We also send out quizzes and regular newsletters & updates to keep people engaged (including paper copies to members without email).” Plymouth u3a

“Under the leadership of a new editor, our Newsletter has expanded considerably both in terms of its length and the number of willing and talented contributors from the membership.” Crewe and Nantwich u3a

“We have made a huge effort to keep in touch with and engage members: celebrating our 10th Anniversary, monthly newsletters, special bulletins (e.g. Year Review attached), our own Christmas card and New Year’s card, extensive use of our licensed Zoom facility by our interest groups, monthly Zoom meetings with speakers, recording 6 x 2-hour programmes for local radio, re-activating our dormant Facebook page (u3a Holmes Chapel & District), and

latterly up-dating our website, which had not been seriously examined since mid-2020.”

Holmes Chapel and District u3a

“Group leaders have been contacting members of their group by telephone or WhatsApp. 10 out of our 27 groups meet regularly by Zoom. The Hibernation Gazette, designed to combat the strains of the pandemic, has been published monthly. It passes on news between members and contains jokes, puzzles and articles by members. The first edition of the Swap Shop paper [i.e. what you are reading now – ed] was circulated to all our committee members and has elicited a great deal of interest. We will be exploring several initiatives tried by other u3as.” Leyland u3a

Multiplying social, general u3a and interest group opportunities online

“The production of our monthly newsletter has included a variety of new projects such as ‘In Focus’ a monthly themed collation of photographs submitted by members. Also, an ‘online board games’ group and ‘virtual coffee mornings / quizzes’ being set up and shared.”

Eastwood and District u3a

“Twice monthly Speaker Meetings continued. Attendance continuing to increase from 40+ to nearly 100 at present. Fortnightly coffee mornings set up on Zoom to alternate with Speaker Meetings. Breakout Rooms used for chats. Brief film/comedy clips to start coffee mornings as stimulus for conversation if needed. Some members only want to be with their friends in Breakout Rooms, but we have resisted this and encourage them to meet other members.”

Witney u3a

“Virtual coffee chats via WhatsApp have also increased opportunities for members to maintain social contact. The committee’s two Interest Group coordinators contacted all the Interest Group coordinators to encourage them to maintain contact with their members and to determine which, if any of the IT platforms, might best meet their needs.” Pontesbury and Rea u3a

“We anticipate keeping some of our online activities going even after the current restrictions are lifted, in parallel with our face-to-face activities, as it is a way of keeping in touch with that part of the membership that may be hindered by infirmity, lack of transport or winter weather conditions from regularly attending u3a events.” Crewe and Nantwich u3a

“The committee has met monthly by Zoom since the Covid-19 lockdown. We have also held monthly general meetings, by Zoom, with an outside speaker to which we have invited neighbouring u3as. The AGM was put back from July to September in view of the Covid-19 effect and was held by Zoom. The renewal date was extended. Monthly general meetings by Zoom, with a member as speaker, started in October. Since December we have offered a virtual Coffee Morning to our members every week called Elevenses – Brew ‘n Bikkies and

once a month Coffee 'n Cake when members and prospective members can chat about any topics. This has led to several new members joining.” Leyland u3a

“Our main focus of attention has been on making our website more creative, attractive and interesting both for existing members and potentially new members. The biggest concerns are how can we entice our existing members to view the website on a regular basis and how can we employ ‘search engine optimisation’. We provide a monthly Newsletter sent to all members through Beacon with positive news of group activities and which includes a reminder to check out the website!” Matlock Area u3a

“We invited those who had joined since 1.9.19 to a virtual New Members’ Meeting. First, we had to introduce many of them to Zoom, itself a time-consuming process. The meeting itself was a success. We were able to introduce some of the members to groups, but the obvious need was for social contact. As a result, we have set up the New Zoomers group (New members who are Zoom users). They have been meeting regularly for a chat over coffee or drinks and want to continue, though we are gradually integrating them into mainstream activities.” Tunbridge Wells u3a

“Our monthly open meetings with guest speakers re-started in October using Zoom and about half of our 22 interest groups also met using Zoom.

Allowing member-to-member chat time before and after speaker meetings is much appreciated.

We considered the need for extra events to justify our membership subscription and have recently started a second series of monthly meetings (talks/quizzes and presentations) as well as regular tea/cake/chat sessions.

The use of breakout rooms allowing team quizzes has extra appeal to our members.

We’ve also started monthly ‘themed’ photo competitions with small ‘liquid’ prizes including an intriguing one which features photos of specific parts of local buildings where there is no background to provide clues to the location!

We’d like to see higher than 50% joining in and haven’t had direct communications to understand why, although we have frustratingly heard some say “we don’t do Zoom”.”

Penicuik and District u3a

“We cancelled our April monthly meeting in the Pavilion and changed to weekly video conferencing meetings. The tragic covid 19 situation had one silver lining as we could book speakers from further afield and indeed from abroad and we enjoyed and are still enjoying fabulous high-quality sessions in our own homes. Initially some of our committee gave weekly presentations which were well received. We were then delighted when our own members came forward, sometimes with help from the Technical committee, to deliver exciting, informative and sometimes intriguing sessions full of suspense. Such talent we discovered!” Exmouth & District u3a

“Our Connect & Learn Group is an exciting and radically different group, which has no limit on the number of members meeting weekly. It aims to offer all members opportunities to benefit from a wide variety of online learning, to suit all interests and tastes.

We share and recommend a range of online learning resources which are high quality, free and easily accessible. By email and via our own website, we have a topic of the month and some recommended online resources which include websites, online courses, videos, podcasts and other audio, apps, blogs and articles, eJournals and eBooks.” Exmouth & District u3a

“For a number of months we have produced a monthly YouTube video an upbeat coverage of developments, with a link sent to all online members. We continue to add content to our website and are making it increasingly attractive to potential new members as well as existing members. We have plans to improve our quarterly Newsletters by looking at best practices for both content and look and feel from many other u3as. We continue to promote more Groups to undertake virtual meetings, currently 30, using positive examples from our own u3a, or other u3as if we need to. As an example, our Family History Group is now running Zoom meetings, following the success of the first such meeting of the Local History Group, which attracted around 70 participants when historically only around 25 participated in the earlier in-hall meetings.” Hillingdon u3a

“We have had 5 new groups which have set up since the end of March. These are Adventures for Us. Cycling, Poetry (reading), Pickleball and Exploring World Heritage Sites. We are running Zoom monthly meetings but that has had low take-up and we are constantly offering support for those wishing to use zoom but unfamiliar with it. Some groups are successfully running using zoom. We are planning some one-off meetings for December to make things feel a bit more festive and fun.” Easingwold and District u3a

“We are encouraging Group Leaders to carry on with online meetings wherever possible (currently 25% of our groups are operating in this mode), and to keep in touch with members via email and phone even when there are no classes scheduled. Our Vice-Chair is hosting a very popular Facebook presence, which, amongst other things, has become the go-to information source for the ever-changing Covid restrictions under which we are living. In the weeks between the Monthly Meetings our members have free access to online, commercially produced, lectures, which we have also offered, free of charge, to our neighbouring u3as in the SE Cheshire Cluster.” Crewe and Nantwich u3a

Technical support and help

“Support to our members [has been given] by telephone, email and zoom. A member of the Committee has undertaken 1:1 training in the use of zoom for those nervous of technology. The Committee have assisted in and supported the use of zoom skills, where necessary. They have planned and delivered ‘newbie’ user and ‘etiquette’ zoom sessions.....The Committee has also requested that any members who have expertise in internet / web-based publicity, become involved, where practicable.” Eastwood and District u3a

“A Membership Subgroup has evolved to support existing members, grow the current offerings and explore recruitment via these offerings. This will include an increased engagement with technology – zoom, Facebook, website improvement etc. In order to widen engagement and committee support, the subgroup includes a majority of non-committee members.” Ledbury and District u3a

“Early on in lockdown 1, the committee agreed to the compilation of a help video about downloading and using of Zoom – this has meant that many members can communicate better with friends & family and within some groups. We also send out quizzes and regular newsletters & updates to keep people engaged (including paper copies to members without email).” Plymouth u3a

“Continuing restrictions have made the advantages of Zoom obvious and we have held several drop-in sessions to introduce members to Zoom. We continue to encourage reluctant members to try and we now offer one-to-one introductions to Zoom. We held our first virtual coffee morning in December at which members asked us to schedule more. We have now therefore arranged monthly Zoom coffee mornings.” Tunbridge Wells u3a

“The publicity officer also provided invaluable research on the many different IT platforms that could be used to keep Interest Groups engaged and active and these included Zoom, Facetime, Skype and WhatsApp. This research not only enhanced the capacity of the u3a to engage with members but also provided some members with the ability to communicate with friends and family thus serving a vital social and well-being function.” Pontesbury and Rea u3a

“I.T. help has been provided (free) by a local person, offering one to one support through landline chats and zoom practice. This is working really well.” Croydon u3a

“To help with the technical issues we were facing, our committee set up a subgroup; a new Technical committee investigating different systems to help the committee and 1000 members. Over the course of the Lockdown 75 individual members were helped mostly by phone call. This has meant that more members have been able to join in with our video conferencing meetings.” Exmouth & District u3a

“We have a session next week from a person working with another local charity to help us get a grip with Facebook.” Merton u3a

“Early on in lockdown 1, the committee agreed to the compilation of a help video about downloading and using of Zoom – this has meant that many members can communicate better with friends & family and within some groups.” Plymouth u3a

Subscriptions and payments

“We held payment over from April until October so that members had a free period of time and we reduced the subscription from £15 to £10 for 2020-21.” Pontesbury & Rea Valley u3a

“We decided to keep our membership fee at £12 a year as we felt that this was very good value for money. All members were contacted and asked to pay by BACs or standing order to avoid our membership secretary receiving cheques or cash in the post. For those members who were unable to use electronic banking we asked them to let us know if they wanted to defer payment of their annual subs.” Exmouth & District

“At present we are allowing online payments for subscriptions which has proved popular.” Glasgow West End u3a

“We have reduced membership fees by 50% for all members for 2021 in recognition that some activities have been curtailed.” Matlock and District u3a

“Pre Covid, 50% of our subscriptions were paid at monthly meetings or coffee mornings. Obviously, this isn't going to be an option for some time to come. We have therefore had to expand our payment options, and we are now looking at adding PayPal to these.” Chepstow u3a

“We reduced our membership fee for this year only in recognition of the fact that we were not offering the full package. So Full members normally £20 reduced to £15 and SIMs (Special Interest members only) £16 reduced to £11.” Benfleet u3a

“We have reduced our membership for 2021 from £25 (includes hall hire charges) to £10.” Hillingdon u3a.

“We decided when our renewal date came around (April) to reduce the membership fee by half. We had a good response to this and found that longstanding members continued to subscribe but the ones who chose not to renew were, primarily, members who had only recently joined.” South East London u3a

“Our normal charge is £14.00 but, as we have paid out much less this year, (no room charge, no coffee or tea and reduced speakers) we are going to offer next year's membership free to current members.” Easingwold and District u3a

“In recognition of the loss of amenity suffered by all our members in the months since the beginning of the lockdown we have reduced the annual subscription to £5 for 2021.” Crewe & Nantwich u3a

“We have progressively reduced our annual subscription from £15 in 2014-15 to £9 in 2019-20, and then with the arrival of Covid, down to £5 for this year (Sept 2020 – August 2021). Our finances are healthy, there is little current expenditure, and it is not our objective to accumulate a large surplus fund.” Holmes Chapel and District u3a

Other: getting feedback from members and attracting new committee members.....by video

“As we were in lockdown it was impossible to make a plea to the membership for new committee members, so the only option was to film a recording of myself making a plea to the membership of our concerns that we badly needed volunteers to step up and help. I am pleased to say this idea has received a lot of support – and resulted in some volunteers coming forward! We had already planned for the recording to be removed after 7 days. We put it on the website and sent a link out to all members asking them to take 10 minutes to read the important message.” Plymouth u3a

“In December we sent out a Questionnaire to members who are online, offering a Prize Draw to those who replied within 2 weeks. Over 30% replied which is apparently an acceptable response. We are still analysing the results which will provide us with valuable information for future planning. We would be happy to send the final results to any u3a which would like to see them.” Tunbridge Wells u3a