

## **Chairs Lunch 6<sup>th</sup> February 2023. J. Tambouridou, Barnet u3a.**

Good morning, everyone. My name is Joanna Tambouridou and I am a Co-Chair of Barnet u3a, together with Rosemary Mayes. I will be telling you about our u3a, how it is set up and how it works, and then Rosemary will talk afterwards about the way forward.

First of all, Barnet u3a is in north west London, with Hertfordshire to our north. We are only fifteen years old, having emerged from between two long-established u3as, North London u3a in Hampstead to the south of us and Potters Bar u3a which is just over the M25 to the north. Three newish u3as have fairly recently been established in our area, Mill Hill, Hampstead Garden Suburb and Palmers Green & Southgate.

We currently have 1,750 members, and are now the largest u3a in London. We have gained new members pretty well every month over the years since I became a member, and even during lockdown we registered new members, in large part because of our online Real Bridge groups. We have about 200 interest groups in all, with large numbers of history, language, book, games and exercise groups. The majority of our groups are held in members' homes (which is why we have so many groups (such as 10 book groups), and we have lots of walks groups and groups visiting places of interest around and about.

We believe that part of our success lies in our positive approach to overcoming various challenges, during lockdown, and at other times. We embraced Zoom quite early on, we haven't restricted our groups or membership in any way and are open to new ideas and formats. We haven't managed to organise hybrid meetings yet for our monthly meetings, mainly because the only hall large enough locally to host us in High Barnet on a weekday morning hasn't got the technical facilities to do this. That's a real pity and one we'd really love to overcome, but it has proved impossible so far.

We also have a very successful trips and outings group, which organises monthly day trips, four or five day holidays in the UK two or three times a year, plus cruises and holidays in Europe. Last year our u3a went to Bavaria, South Devon and Derbyshire, this year to the Isle of Man, Cheshire and a Danube cruise. Next year who knows! This contributes hugely to the social vibrancy of our u3a, together with our other social

events like quizzes, barn dances, tea parties, picnics, river boat trips and our educational events and workshops.

Our committee has usually consisted of about ten members and from the very beginning we have always had co-chairs. Our first two co-chairs were Chris Feldman, who you may remember helped to organise our London Summer Schools for many years, and Ian McCannah who was the previous National u3a Chairman. Chris tells me that they decided to have co-chairs from the start because of the unexpectedly large response when setting up Barnet u3a initially with over 300 new members signing up after the two initial set-up meetings in the local library. He feels that having co-chairs provided continuity and cohesion for the committee and the membership, and we have had four sets of co-chairs in all, often staying on in office for four years at a time.

We do believe in Barnet that having co-chairs has given our committee a large amount of stability and consensus. Rosemary and I find it invaluable to have someone to bounce ideas off, to talk through difficult problems and complaints, and to share the various tasks involved, which in turn prevents either one of us becoming overwhelmed with a difficult issue. We haven't actually divided up our roles, we each just take on the next task, whatever that is. And having co-chairs means that at least one of us can attend every invitation, be it our own events, or u3a London region or other stuff. It also means that two people of entirely different personalities and talents can take on the chair position, which can be an advantage.

We got to know each other on our social sub-committee during a rather hectic twelve months when we organised a dozen or so social events to celebrate Barnet u3a's tenth anniversary. And I do think that Chairs or Co-Chairs should have spent some time as ordinary committee members before moving into an officer role on their committee, the knowledge of how their u3a works is very valuable indeed.

Well, that's enough from me for now, so it's over to Rosemary for the second half of our presentation – the way forward.

## TALK TO LONDON CHAIRS LUNCH 6<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 2023. Rosemary Mayes, Barnet u3a.

As Joanna has just explained, Barnet u3a has continued to thrive over the last three years despite the challenges we have all faced and it is very encouraging that our membership is now larger than it was at the beginning of the pandemic. We don't want to rest on our laurels though and, although attracting new members is not an issue for us, we do realise that unless we continue to offer a wide range of groups, events and learning opportunities this success may not be sustainable. Our vision for the future (if that is not too grandiose a term), will focus on some key issues therefore, These are:

- **Use of technology.** Using Zoom for both monthly meetings and group activities from early on during lockdown helped us to retain the majority of our membership during that period. Although we have now largely returned to face to face for most of our activities, we are aware that there is still a significant minority of our members who would prefer to participate from their own homes. Unfortunately, the hall we use for our monthly meetings has not got the technical facilities to enable us to offer hybrid meetings. However, we are anxious to pursue this option and we are using another venue for the workshop we are holding at the end of March where we can offer that option.
- **Effective communication with all members.** We have recently set up a Communications Group to look at the ways we communicate with all members and to come up with a strategy for future communications. The appointment of a new editor for our weekly members update has already produced significant improvements in terms of presentation and content but we are aiming for more joined up communications with proper linkage between our website and the weekly update. We also continue to be concerned about the information needs of the 10% of our members who do not use technology and we are thinking about conducting another member survey (we last did one about 5 years ago) which will ask about this and also learning provision and social activities
- **Provision for learning.** Besides the learning opportunities offered by our wide range of groups, we want to continue to emphasise the 'learn' aspects of the u3a and will continue with the intermittent series of workshops/study-days we started during the pandemic. Our next one at the end of March is entitled 'Sustainable Living: Less Stuff, More Joy' and will endeavour to explain what biodiversity means and, with the help of local experts, explore how we can help improve our local environment. Other future possibilities include 'taster' sessions in new areas of activity to test out the feasibility of setting up a group

- the Alexander Technique and mindfulness have been suggested, for example. Further workshops/study days on local and family history will also be considered given their success in the past.

- **Social activities.** Joanna and I have been heavily involved in arranging social activities since the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary and our social committee is always on the lookout for new ideas. The barn dance we held last week was a great success and I think we will be looking at other activities of this kind including new ways to make new members feel welcome – quite a challenge given the size of our u3a!
- **Succession planning.** This is one of our main concerns as co-chairs since we both believe that regular turnover in committee members and chairs is essential for the continuing health of the organisation. After some effort, we have succeeded in recruiting a new treasurer and at least one new committee member. However, finding a new chair has been less successful – Joanna and I were due to stand down in April – but we do have hopes that this will be easier to achieve next year. We also have to find a new person or persons to find speakers for our monthly meetings by the end of the year. This is likely to include speaker payment for the first time and we will be considering how to manage this in practice at our next committee meeting having agreed to this in principle already.
- **Links with other organisations.** We have a lot of links with our local community and many local organisations regularly advertise in our monthly non-Barnet u3a e-mail. I have also recently been appointed to the London Age Friendly Forum on behalf of the Third Age Trust and hope to use this as an opportunity to work more closely with the other organisations involved. As Chair of the London Regional Committee of the WEA I am also pleased to see that the CEOs of both the Trust and the WEA are talking about working more closely together.

On a final note, I have really enjoyed my time as co-chair and cannot praise Joanna enough for being a great person to work with.