

New Initiative - Monthly 'New Member's social.

**Sandy Boden, BROMLEY u3a.**

### **How we did things when I joined in 2018**

Previously there had been two events a year in a large hall with various Interest Group exhibitions round the sides of the hall. Refreshments were served, but in reality the event was a bit 'cold'.

Apart from the new member making being brave enough to talk to one of the Group Leaders manning the stands around the hall, no obvious efforts were made to welcome or engage the new members. I remember just walking around, having my cup of tea and leaving. There was nothing to tell me about the benefits of joining the u3a in general and I could have left without speaking to a soul!

### **First change**

I became Secretary, in April 2019, and in that May, I had to organise the New Members meeting in its traditional format and with the best will in the world, just could not feel it was helping our members.

So, in that October, I and the membership Secretary started a different idea by hiring a room and inviting a batch of new members there with just the two of us in a smaller and more informal meeting.

We had managed just four of these meetings by March 2020, refining our method as we went along. Then of course it all just stopped! Remember a certain Pandemic?

### **Interim Zooms during lockdowns**

I did have intermittent Zoom meetings for new members during lockdowns on the 'better than nothing' principle, but of course this was just a stop gap and never as satisfactory. The members could not really connect with each other in a Zoom – people do prefer to meet people.

By the time things got easier in mid July of 2022, I was now Chair and had several new committee members who were on the same wave length.

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### **The new way forward**

So last July we invited all new members to book to come to a smaller social at a local pub or cafe. We have continued to do these on a monthly basis, again refining the process as we go. I and two other committee members do it so we can split the numbers into small groups for more informal chats.

I have an agenda of information in a handout which everyone gets and I go through it all with each small group. This way Bromley key terms and acronyms are covered and the use of Beacon is explained.

I'm also keen that members are aware of the very useful additional resources such as TAM, Interest Groups Online, London Region events and Third Age Trust Online Learning Events.

We 'sell' them the u3a proposition and benefits. Then we emphasise the volunteer aspect, recommend some easy to join groups, ask them to think about new ideas and let them chat.

That last bit, the chatting, is perhaps what seems the best thing. People are relaxed, it's easy to chat with the people around you and the ice has been broken. This friendly atmosphere means the new members go away feeling they are welcome and part of something special.

This approach has also resulted in several new Interest Groups starting up.

It does take organising and the willingness of the committee members or other volunteers to make the effort on a regular basis and to believe in the importance of a welcoming initiative. But none of this is rocket science, but sometimes the simplest ideas are the ones that work.