



CHAIR'S NETWORK EVENT 2024 REPORT (by Liz Day)

This includes a summary of the table discussions, the presentations by guests and participants and final conclusions.

Part 1 HOW WE RUN OUR u3as - Notes from Table Discussions

1. What actions have been taken based on feedback from last 2023 meeting?

- Not aware of feedback from last meeting until today. Many first timers, who have not heard about work of LR Chair's Network before today. Communication within u3as problematic. New Chairs did not get info from last year until final AGENDA circulated.
- Created Teams for non-Committee tasks e.g. Outreach team and a Magazine team with roving reporters, team of editors and distribution team.
- TASTER sessions – one offs. Encourage new members to do this when interviewed, in order to get more people involved pro-actively and avoid waiting lists for popular groups. Sometimes works well, but doesn't always lead to sustained groups.
- Improved communications through Beacon and Websites.
- Recognised the challenge of getting volunteers, with no succession planning in place.
- Took back suggestions about how to start new groups. Successful progress made.
- Set up a meet and greet team at Monthly meetings

2. What additional initiatives have you developed and what still needs to be done?

- A survey of members. More social activities, including monthly meetings. Finding out members' expertise when they join. Lunch meetings for Group Leaders, invited in themed groups. Teams supporting Committee Members.
- Mixed coffee mornings with new and old members. New members are lifeblood of our u3a. Buddy system for new committee members
- Leaflet series about positive membership experience of individual members. Regular meetings with group leaders. Regular contact with members.
- Thinking outside traditional u3a model e.g. Bollywood social, evening events.
- Use social media communication e.g. with neighbourhood and local residents groups.
- Developed some links with residential care home, through holding some meetings there.
- Redesigned website . Focus on encouraging recruitment.
- Communication bulletins sent entirely by email (with individual exceptions made on request).

3. How do your members benefit from your u3a?

- We encourage members to speak at our Monthly meetings – everyone has a story to tell.
- Coffee meetings to integrate members and communicate the u3a Ethos and Expectations, with Buddy systems for new members
- Helped members with accessibility issues to remain involved and made genuine efforts to be inclusive and be a lifeline for loneliness

- Regular support sessions provided for computer skills updates, following on from assistance provided for the rapid adoption of technology during lockdown .
- Solve the waiting list problem : Group Convenors were 'told' by the committee to divide their group in two, if there were waiting lists. It worked!
- Collaboration with neighbouring u3as developed to enable members to attend minority groups. Finances not an issues – the lead u3a pays for the shared group.
- Lockdown developed zoom use and members' skills, but now most u3as are moving to preferred physical meetings, though occasional hybrid use and monthly meetings recorded for limited duration.
- Membership of u3as not necessarily a problem – some grow, some stable and often limited by size of venues.
- u3as can also be focused to meet the needs of 65+ yr olds. Energies may be better spent on seeking to meet their increasing expectations of post-retirement life, than seeking to expand u3as with younger members?

4. How have you contributed to these developments?

- Remained open to new ideas, while being careful not to take on too much. Champion an idea and find the resources/money to follow it through.
- Brought Life Skills from professional life and Chair or Committee experience of other organisations, in order to implement policies, procedures and systems
- Set up a subcommittee to encourage all aspects of EDI (Equality Diversity & Inclusion)
- Selected and adopted SIMPLE system, not BEACON
- Developed a Co-Chair role and split Finance and Membership roles.
- Arranged that all committee roles are shared/shadowed, so there is a successor in place. Handover notes are kept which aid this, but conversation also needed. And Teams set up for time-limited or simpler roles e.g. running an event, teas, etc.
- Organised a formal thanks to members who take on backroom roles

2. PRESENTATIONS

2.1. Reflections, Ian McCannah

Ian gave some personal reflections of the value of u3a movement since he joined and then focused on some issues that he grappled with when he was Chair. Firstly he described the re-branding process he led, deciding, after much consultation to stick with u3a name, but adopt the new logo of Learn, Laugh, Live, rather than spelling out 'University of the Third Age' that has proved problematic. As he said, everyone knows CNN and BMW brands well, but who knows what the letters stand for?

Some wondered where their £4 subscription went. Derek Harwood advised that it was all targeted to supporting u3as.. For example 76% of it went on paying for the staff and premises to support the help line (email submissions or by 'phone). Can peak at 250 telephone and 210 emails per week. Need to raise the national profile further; need better national publicity; need to provide better branded leaflets for u3as.

Question raised re a digital version of the Third Age Mattes magazine; answer provided that there is a volunteer group working with Redactive (the magazine publishing company) to develop a digital version; but this might take a year before it is available. In the meantime there is a cut down magazine version available through the national website currently. There will be issues to work through as

expected that a digital version will not attract the same level of advertising (which currently covers all production costs). The £3.80 only pays for distribution/postage costs

2.2. Fit for the Future, John Bent

John explained how this had come about – a governance review in 2020 and the current Regional Trustees saying they are overloaded, with not enough time for supporting their Region/Nation. The 'Council' suggest a slimmed down Board with specific skills to run the u3a business with additional Council representatives to discuss regional matters. Each Region/Nation will have two, rather than one 'Trustee'. Some said they found proposals confusing. There will be detailed presentations available to London u3as on **8th and 22nd March**. Invite has been sent out through LRU3A mailshot. Reminder that, if Chairs are not receiving this, then their contact details should be given to Rikki Wallman (membership.londonregionu3a@gmail.com).

2.3. National Chairs Forum, Jenny Wilson

This is an informal forum set up nationally and is open to all u3a Chairs. They meet online monthly. Currently there are over 200 Chairs who have joined. They circulate notes to those that haven't been able to attend. Notes of meetings available on the LRU3A website: <https://u3asites.org.uk/code/u3asite.php?site=368&page=83061>

PART 2 – LEARNING FROM OTHERS

3.1. Small teams, Bite-Size groups, etc - Val Girling, Palmers Green & Southgate: Val shared her experiences of being Chair one year on. Many 4-session taster/bite-size groups have become embedded and other new ones started up (60% increase) keeping the Interest Group programme continually refreshed. Other ideas included welcome teas

3.2. Social Events & Excursions- Derek Atkinson, Ealing: has an extensive 'Excursions' programme. They work with a Tour Operator to organise day and weekend trips. Social 'teas' , held in 5 different locations in the neighbourhood for accessibility are also popular (75 attending each).

3.3. MOTO - Louise Bennet, Kenton & District: Not just a group for Members On Their Own, but provided other events in the evenings and weekends, attractive to some members. Participation was the key, with members of this group taking turns to organise meetings/outings and inviting others to join them. Communication via WhatsApp.

3.4. Filling Committee Roles - Jane Fisher, Merton: Create a succession plan; each role to have a 'shadow' or assistant. Or have 'teams' to cover roles (e.g. Groups Management team). Wrote a clear job description for each Committee role to avoid any ambiguity. Updating guidance and compulsory embedding of EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) for all activities throughout Merton u3a to reflect the community.

3.5. Local Networks/ Partnerships - Chris Melville, SE London: Have formed a popular relationship with Goldsmiths College to give access to lunchtime lectures from the Professors(some retired), with on average about 50 attending each. Some other u3as had similar arrangements with their local university/college (e.g. Islington and Metropolitan University of London) and community organisations (e.g. Bromley and local theatre)

3.6. LRU3A Chairs WhatsApp Group - Paula Kahn, Islington: While this had been set up following request from last year's Chairs' Lunch, there hadn't been much traffic. Some Chairs weren't aware of it. If they wanted to join then send 'phone number to Derek Harwood (VChairN.londonregionu3a@gmail.com). Sue Howe, Orpington, said she found WhatsApp groups very good for communication, and the Kent Network provided quick effective advice. Suggested they might be used for LRU3A's Peer Support Groups as additional to, not instead of Zoom meetings. The key however for successful WhatsApp groups was continual posting (e.g. average new item every three days). All must contribute to these posts to keep it lively and of interest. Nationally there are two u3a WhatsApp groups: 'Keeping In Touch' and 'Fit For the Future'. All can join those.

3.7. Surveying Members - Joanna Tambouridou, Barnet: 1060 members invited to take part in the survey. 180 Groups, 450 members responded. Wide ranging questions were raised. Used Google Forms. Sub team analysed results and produced report of problems, recommendations and actions arising. Very useful to the committee to inform planning and members felt engaged as well.

3.8. Digital Methods - Vivek Nanda, Islington: briefly mentioned areas for discussion in the future such as use of digital learning and AI to help with running u3as.

PART 3. WHAT DO WE DO NEXT?

Brief conclusions made about the onerous nature of the Chair's Role and the need to delegate and be supported well by an active exec committee, particularly when decisive decisions need to be made. Provide good communications to support Chairs with information through the London Region's website links e.g. Network Link meetings, Peer Support Groups, Shared Practice Guides, further learning opportunities e.g. Summer School activities, Study Days, Online talks. Lots of ideas noted to digest as a result of the discussions and presentations. Chairs agreed to report back to their committees and consider ideas to inform u3a practice.