

## U3A CHAIRS' FORUM MEETING NOTES 22 JANUARY 2024

100 Chairs with 25-30 unable to join because of the 100-participant limit.

### SUMMARY POINTS

#### Update report

**Model constitution:** Confusion was expressed as to whether u3as are free to set their own constitution with different opinions being voiced by some trustees and the Office. Irrespective of this, u3as wish to see the amended wording agreed by the Board of the Third Age Trust.

**Gift Aid:** In describing how one u3a sets its fees, it became clear that there is confusion over which costs may be included in a Gift Aid claim. Chairs are looking for greater clarity in the Trust's guidance notes.

**Raising the profile of u3a:** There were questions as to what has happened since this was adopted at the 2023 AGM as a priority for the Trust. Chairs' expect to see a report of last year's Trust-led publicity activities, more detail about the Trust's past and planned expenditure on publicity and external communications, and the publicity and external communication plan for the coming year.

**Consultation on the Trust's Council proposal:** The consultation process was outlined and Chairs encouraged to participate. The issue of the proposed Council will be discussed by the Chairs' Forum in March.

#### Membership fees and actions to limit costs

**Membership costs:** There was a short presentation of Worcester u3a's membership costs (i.e. costs excluding interest groups). For this u3a, half of the amount is paid over to the Trust, including the £4 per capita fee, £3.60 for each member taking the Third Age Magazine, TAM, and £1 per member for the finance and administration system, Beacon. The presentation also showed the breakdown of the Trust per capita fee-related costs recast along the lines of how the Trust spends its money as shown on the Charity Commission website.

**Trust per capita fee:** There was no discussion about the amount of the per capita fee paid to the Trust but a strongly held view that the Trust lacks transparency in the way it applies its income. Chairs indicated they would be unlikely to support the Council proposal unless it has a significant say over setting the Trust's budgets and activities.

The discussion also highlighted further examples of a lack of responsiveness to enquiries and emails from u3as. This was raised in the October 2023 Chairs' Forum meeting and does not appear to have improved.

**Membership fees:** The amount of the membership fee charged by different u3as generated a great deal of interest with an exchange of information about fees. This highlighted the variety in local circumstances and approaches and there was a call to conduct a short survey amongst members of the Chairs' Forum.

**Third Age Matters magazine (TAM):** There were two points:

The announcement that the distribution company has gone into liquidation raised concerns about getting copies to new members and copies being sent to lapsed members and are no longer covered by income. This will become more of an issue the longer the problem with distribution continues.

Given the low readership amongst members, u3as have or are considering reducing or opting out from receiving copies.

## MEETING NOTES

### UPDATE REPORT

A short amount of time was given over to allow clarification of any points in the written update report circulated before the meeting

**Model Constitution:** There is confusion whether u3as are free to set their own constitution, or whether changes must be approved by the Office on behalf of the Third Age Trust (the Trust). Mixed messages are being given by trustees and the guidance issued by the Office.

Irrespective of the resolution of this issue, u3as want to see the revised wording of the model constitution as approved by the Trust Board, so as to make an informed decision about how to proceed.

**Gift Aid:** No questions but see below.

**AGM resolution to raise the profile of the u3a movement and expand the membership:** No questions but see below.

**Third Age Matters magazine (TAM):** See below.

**Consultation on the proposed u3a Council:** This will be the topic for discussion at the Chairs' Forum meeting on 25 March. By then, u3as will have had the opportunity to read the material, attend the presentations, and ask for clarification.

It was pointed out that for some u3as the timing of the consultation process would cut across the change in committee membership and mean that the new committee might be asked to vote at an AGM without the benefit of the earlier discussions.

The question as to what extent to involve members in the discussions surrounding the potential council was raised. It was suggested that this is a matter for individual u3as to decide.

Since the meeting, several u3as have said they did not receive the email announcing the consultation (dated 22.01.2024). Chairs were advised to contact the national Office to ensure that they are included.

### MEMBERSHIP FEES AND ACTIONS TO LIMIT INCREASES

#### Introduction:

To introduce the discussion, a short presentation was given showing the breakdown of membership costs in Worcester u3a. This covered two separate areas: the expenses funded from the basic membership fee (i.e. excluding interest groups), and the breakdown of costs covered by the per capita fee paid to the Trust. The slides are attached.

Worcester u3a, has around 900 members and membership costs amount to roughly £12. Almost exactly half of this is money paid over to the Trust and its trading arm, TATTL. This includes £1 per member for the Beacon administration system, £3.60 for each member taking TAM (around 15% of members), and the £4 per capita fee to the Trust.

The Trust has provided two charts detailing the expenditure of the £4 per capita. Additionally, information from the Charity Commission website highlights three areas that indicate how the Trust allocates its income: support for existing u3as, development of new u3as, and raising the profile of the u3a movement in the UK. For clarity, the Trust information was recast following these lines.

Beyond the £4 per capita fee, which annually generates approximately £1.5 million, the Trust's trading company contributes an additional £1.35 million. This includes Beacon, TAM, branded goods, membership benefit schemes, etc.

**Allocation between external and internal communication expenses:** In explaining how the Trust numbers have been presented, the question arose as to how much of the spend on publicity and

communications relates to external and how much to internal communication as the breakdown is not shown in the Trust information.

The discussion highlighted that Chairs expect to see:

- A report of the publicity and communications activities led by the Trust for the past year.
- More detailed information on the Trust's expenditure for external publicity.
- And in light of the resolution passed at the last AGM to increase u3a's national visibility, a campaign and activities plan for external (public-facing) communication for the coming year. It was pointed out that this is a strategic priority for the Board, but there had not been an announcement as to how the resolution is to be implemented. In the absence of information, it was suggested that u3as should contact their regional trustee and ask what progress has been made.

**Support services:** Some u3as have encountered problems with a lack of responsiveness to emails and enquiries. This has been an issue for some time and despite being highlighted in the October 2023 Chairs' Forum meeting, has not improved.

### **TAT per capita fee:**

There were mixed views about the importance of the absolute amount of the per capita fee. u3as value the time spent addressing significant national issues, such as Trust policies, publicity, TAM, Gift Aid, etc., rather than the level of the per capita fee. However, the way in which the Trust spends the per capita fee was of general concern.

Chairs who participated in the discussions ahead of the 2022 AGM, reminded the Forum that the major issue when faced with a proposal from the Trust to index increases in the per capita fee was not the intention to raise the level but the lack of transparency about how it was to be spent and the proposed mechanism.

One Chair summarised the present situation: ... I'm grappling with questions about the value of being part of u3a. There's a pressing need for transparency and evidence regarding how per capita fees are utilised, particularly in areas like marketing and publicity. The lack of clarity is a concern.

There was endorsement of the view that support for the proposed council will largely depend on how much influence it will have on decisions regarding the per capita fee and how budgets, such as publicity, are allocated. Chairs indicated that if the council lacks this influence, then any increase in costs would be treated with suspicion. Chairs were reminded that they will have the opportunity to put their views on the proposal as part of the consultation process.

### **Membership fees:**

There was recognition of the diversity of u3as and the variety of different approaches to managing their finance. Membership fees are influenced by the variety of activities, local, regional, and economic circumstances and it was acknowledged that discussion of a particular approach to setting membership fees may not be widely relevant.

u3as shared information about their current membership fee with fee levels ranging from £10 p.a. (lowered to reduce a surplus in the general reserve) to £45 p.a., which includes funding interest groups. In summary:

A quarter of the 100 participants provided information about their membership fees, ranging from £10 to £45 p.a.



Over one-third of u3as cover the cost of interest groups within the annual membership fee (7 of 17 u3as). However, u3as who set a lower membership fee are less likely to pay for interest groups from membership fee income:

69% of u3as (18 u3as) set their membership fee at £20 or less (average £15). Almost all of these u3as require interest groups to be self-funding (90%).

31% of u3as set their membership fee at £20 or more (8 u3as) and are more likely to fund the cost of interest groups from membership fees (86%).

Of the small number of u3as who gave information about Third Age Matters magazine, most (6 out of 8 u3as) include the cost of TAM within the membership fee (*n.b. because of the nature of the discussion and the small number of u3as volunteering information, this needs to be verified and must not be taken to be anything but suggestive*).

### Third Age Matters magazine (TAM):

With the recent announcement that the distribution company responsible for managing the TAM mailing lists has gone into liquidation, the Office has taken over the distribution of the next edition due in February and are actively seeking an alternative for the following edition, due in April.

u3as expressed their concerns about providing copies to members who have lapsed and are no longer funding the cost of the magazine, and on the other hand, new members who are not included on the mailing list. u3as have taken the opportunity to receive copies in bulk for distribution as a one-off.

An announcement about the arrangements for the April is awaited.

In the context of membership fees, u3as experience a low readership amongst members, typically 15% or less, and some u3as are see a reduction in the number of TAM copies as a way to keep fees down whilst still giving good value to members.

u3as have or are considering different options. Three alternatives were identified:

- The most widely used alternative is to require members who wish to receive TAM to pay an additional fee.
- Adopting a system where members must positively request the magazine to continue receiving copies (i.e. members must opt-in).
- Cancelling TAM altogether and making the content available by link to the text-only online version.

### Gift Aid:

One u3a mentioned that they pay for their basic membership costs from Gift Aid claimed on the total subscription fee, which includes funding interest groups. It was suggested that they check with the Office as this was counter to Gift Aid guidance, which stresses that Gift Aid may not be claimed where there is personal benefit. There were a few comments during the meeting and more on the Forum's Facebook page

asking for greater clarity over which expenses are allowable for Gift Aid as the Trust note is not sufficiently explicit.

### **Information about u3as:**

Chairs welcomed the additional information regarding membership fees, but equally recognised the potential for differing circumstances and approaches and which are reflected in the annual fees.

There was support for a survey to provide a comparative overview across the country. This might include information on such things as:

- The number of members, the percentage of the target population who are members, the nature of the local area and region.
- Membership models used by u3as, membership fees, costs, meeting locations and their frequency.

Such information would counter generalisations about u3a trends, give a better understanding of the diverse financial landscapes, and provide much needed information in support of recruitment and promotion of the u3a movement.

A proposal was made was to draft a survey to be sent to members of the Chairs' Forum for them to complete, with the information collated centrally. Whilst the Chair's Forum lacks resources for a large-scale project, it was suggested that we can efficiently use tools like SurveyMonkey which automatically aggregates results and would facilitate data collection and analysis.

One of our members with experience in running surveys volunteered their services, which is much appreciated. The Forum organisers are aware of Trust discussions looking at a number of possible research projects and will coordinate to ensure there is no duplication of effort.

## SUMMARY

Based on the detailed update report from the meeting, the key recommendations and points of discussion can be summarized as follows:

1. **\*\*Model Constitution\*\***: There's confusion about whether u3as can set their own constitution or need approval from the Office on behalf of the Third Age Trust. It's recommended that u3as should see the revised wording of the model constitution as approved by the Trust Board to make an informed decision.
2. **\*\*Consultation on the Proposed u3a Council\*\***: The upcoming Chairs' Forum meeting will discuss this. It's noted that the timing of the consultation may affect new committee members' involvement in decision-making. The extent to which members should be involved in discussions about the potential council is a decision for individual u3as.
3. **\*\*Membership Fees and Actions to Limit Increases\*\***: There was a presentation on the breakdown of membership costs, highlighting concerns over the transparency of how the Trust spends the per capita fee. There's a need for more clarity on this, especially regarding marketing and publicity expenditures.
4. **\*\*Allocation Between External and Internal Communication Expenses\*\***: Chairs expect detailed information on the Trust's expenditure for external publicity and a plan for external communication activities in the coming year.
5. **\*\*Support Services\*\***: Issues with responsiveness from the Trust were discussed, with a need for improvement noted.
6. **\*\*Third Age Matters Magazine (TAM)\*\***: Concerns were raised about distribution issues and the cost-effectiveness of TAM. Alternatives like additional fees for TAM, opt-in systems, or shifting to an online-only version were discussed.
7. **\*\*Gift Aid\*\***: A u3a's approach to using Gift Aid for basic membership costs was questioned, and clarity over allowable expenses for Gift Aid was requested.
8. **\*\*Information about u3as and Survey Proposal\*\***: Chairs supported a survey for a comparative overview across u3as to understand diverse financial landscapes and support recruitment and promotion. The use of tools like SurveyMonkey and coordination to avoid duplication of efforts in research projects were suggested.

These points reflect the need for clear communication, transparency in financial matters, and thoughtful consideration of the diverse needs and structures of different u3as. The recommendations and discussions aim to enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the u3a movement.