

Background and Summary

At last we have started, during this year, to come out of the pandemic. However, over most of the year, members were still nervous about resuming face to face meetings and many of our activities continued on Zoom.

Membership of LRU3A continues at 43 u3as but some of these have seen a fall in membership over the pandemic period. Others managed to hold membership steady, but none reported growth. Membership figures overall for London Region over the last few years are:

- March 2019 25,823
- March 2020 25,888
- March 2021 20,973
- March 2022 21,032

Nationally, while numbers dropped over the pandemic period, membership is again growing now. There is a push to raise the profile of u3a nationally to help local recruitment. Our regional Public Relations Advisor has worked locally and liaised nationally to support this initiative.

LRU3A main initiatives and activities this year have been: Delegates meetings, Peer Support Groups, supporting 40th Anniversary programme (by 'Walking Around London'), Online Talks Programme, Summer School and general communications of other events happening across the region or nationally. We also tried to create an 'Open Door' policy with u3as across London sharing talks and events with some limited success.

The 'Walk Around London' event was supported by 28 u3as with 530 members walking a total of 3,100 miles (including both the Capital Ring and the LOOP).

Like many individual u3as, the LRU3A Executive Committee has not been successful in recruiting members to fill gaps and find successors for departing committee members. This has led to a limitation of the initiatives we have been able to support or promote. However we hope that you have felt that our regional network activities have been of use and have supported you in your activities. The following are some of this year's main activities and achievements.

Objectives of the London Region of U3As (LRU3A)

Our objectives remain to support London u3a committees and educational/social activities for all our members. As a regional network, our support extends to all London u3as, and together with our Regional Trustee as ex-officio member of the Executive Committee, we uphold and benefit from the work of the Third Age Trust in London and provide a voice for London u3as at regional and national levels.

Delegate Meetings

The Executive Committee have always been keen to respond to and facilitate the interests and wishes of all u3as in our network – we are not a 'top-down' organisation. The Delegate meetings provide a quarterly opportunity for representatives to get together, discuss issues, exchange ideas and provide mutual support (a problem discussed is a problem halved).

Delegate meetings this year have included sessions on:

- Looking Ahead Positively, The Trust's Developing Strategy, u3a's 40th Anniversary Planning
- Reports from Trustees & Peer Support Groups, News from the Trust, News from London u3as, 40th Anniversary Plans
- News (from National, Region & local u3as), Recruitment & Retention

Last year's average representation at these meetings was 64% and this year it was 62% possibly due to Zoom fatigue and easing of government restrictions on personal gatherings and travel. We hope that in 2022/23 we return to some face-to-face meetings but the attraction of Zoom and avoiding a commute across London is probably here to stay.

Peer Support Group Networks (PSGs)

The PSGs are role-based mutual support networks for u3a committee and other post-holders, but are also encouraged to share their knowledge more widely via the LRU3A website and Delegate meetings. The LRU3A has encouraged the establishment of PSGs, and representatives of the Executive Committee attend meetings to provide support if required. A common issue has been the lack of peer volunteers prepared to help with coordinating meetings, planning agendas, and facilitating activities.

Treasurers: the first to be established, but unfortunately was still dormant this year due to a lack of Coordinator.

IT/Webmasters: Has continued to meet online regularly and has looked at a range of subjects including: Hybrid / Alternative Meetings Update, Website Analytics, Gmail auto forwarding, Sitebuilder replacement, Beacon update, Simple Membership or Alternative Membership Systems, Use of 'Let's Talk Tech' national initiative, Credit Card Readers, Barcode Readers, Digital Strategy, Subtitles on PowerPoint, Recent Sitebuilder Crash, Sitebuilder Replacement (again), SPGs on MailChimp, Wufoo, Placelt software and Cloud Storage Alternatives

The Groups Coordinators: This group has met twice since the last AGM - in December 2021 and in March 2022. The December meeting considered Diversity and Inclusion, organised and led by Judith Altshul, a member from Islington u3a and on this Peer group Steering Committee. She organised for fellow members of the national D & I committee to report on their initiatives and invited others to report on current practice and initiatives in their own u3as.

The March meeting considered the u3a Learning provision. Presentations were invited from u3a staff – the Head of Member Services and the Learning Manager and we also heard from the Coordinator of Trust u3a about its extensive online provision.

Leadership of this Peer group relies on LR Committee members. Once organised, about 40% of London u3as attend, resulting in lively discussions and reports of good practice, but it is hard to sustain the enthusiasm for problem solving from one meeting to the next.

Public Relations: This Peer Group has continued to arrange workshop sessions on relevant subjects. There were two key sessions on Writing Effective Press Releases; and Recruiting Younger New Members in the last few months to add to earlier workshops on u3a Newsletters, Public Relations, Outreach and Developing Facebook Ads. Workshop events are publicised to any London Region u3a member designated with a PR or Publicity role, and to all Chairs.

PR Adviser Rodney Fox has continued to issue regular PR Mailings (all entries available under the Peer Support tab on the London Region website) giving suggestions for initiatives based upon success in other London Region u3as, or indeed elsewhere in the UK.

Rodney is moving away from London, so we are looking for a successor to keep this active PSG running.

Chairs: While not a regularly meeting PSG as the above, this year we organised a 'Chairs' Lunch'. This was appreciated and well supported. It was a chance for many to meet face to face for the first time (including some of the LRU3A Executive Committee). The agenda included:

- Session 1: New technologies & developments for u3as,
- Session 2: Attracting & retaining a diverse membership,
- Session 3: Collaboration & regional networking
- Session 4: How to you see the future for London u3as?

Communications

Video Conferencing: Our Zoom Pro account with a Larger Meeting add-on (500-attendee capacity) has again been used for most LRU3A Executive and Delegate meetings, and the Online Talks Programme (see Education/Social Events), as well as by the Peer Group Networks. In addition, it has been used by some London u3as, particularly for online monthly meetings and AGMs. We are grateful for the subsidy from our Regional Trust's funds to support this initiative which has enabled large numbers of u3a members to participate in regional activities. We have continued using Zoom to host the weekly drop-in sessions of a national initiative called 'Lets Talk Tech'

(<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81993153499?pwd=OHM5eTlCS2YxaUdyRlZMcjFLU2tKQT09> Meeting ID: 819 9315 3499 Passcode: 754565), as well as supporting the associated website (<https://u3asites.org.uk/code/u3asite.php?site=1144&page=0>) and closed Facebook Group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1002726203847774/>).

Bulk Messaging: The LRU3A Communications Team evaluated 'Beacon for Networks' and decided to stay with our current set of applications (Mailchimp & Wufoo) as the current capabilities of the LRU3A exceeded the functionality of 'Beacon for Networks'. We are nevertheless dependent on key contact details being kept up to date by u3a representatives informing the Mailchimp Advisor (mailchimpadvisor.lru3a@gmail.com) of any changes. Thanks.

Educational / Social Events

Online events: Altogether, 18 talks with Q&A sessions were delivered online between September 2021 and April 2022, continuing the popular fortnightly Zoom sessions on Monday afternoons. Altogether 2,100 members attended – with numbers higher Jan-April (average 170 attendees /69% of applicants per session) than Sept-Dec (average 79 attendees/74% of applicants per session). About 700 attendees were new to our database. Anticipating a decline in online attendance during the Summer months, we decided to take a break. Some members expressed disappointment as they were unable/reluctant to meet in person, but were referred to the online sessions hosted by u3a Office

Summer School 2022: Encouraged by the success of the one-day Summer School in 2021, we opted for a two-day event on 26th/27th July. The venue was again the St. Bride Institute off Fleet Street. The theme was 'Discovering London – Past, Present and Future'. The programme comprised 18 talks, 3 creative workshops, and 8 guided walks. As usual, topics were drawn from a wide range of subject areas. 60% of contributors were u3a members. This year there was a particularly strong demand for walks with spaces selling out within 4 days of launching ticket sales. It appeared that Covid had created an appetite for outdoor activity. With the cooperation of walk guides, we increased the number of spaces to 160.

Altogether there were 223 applicants of whom 50% had not attended a London summer school before. 33 London u3as, and 37 non-London u3as were represented (from as far away as Northumbria, Wales, Norfolk, Devon). We catered for about 180 people per day. Like last year, we served pre-packed lunches (more hygienic and a faster service). We were able to keep the ticket price down to the pre-Pandemic level of £39. With the higher than anticipated number of tickets sold this made a surplus of £916 (see Treasurer's report).

Unfortunately due to increasing Covid, and the train strike on 27th July there were a number of late cancellations which we were unable to refund. As stated in the programme from the beginning, the cut-off date for refunds was 26th June after which we would have forfeited our payment for the venue. Nevertheless, around 70% of applicants were able to attend on the strike day.

We received an average of 70% feedback forms for the 2 days. With the majority of sessions rated as good or excellent. It was clear that most people had enjoyed the event, with 80% of respondents saying that they intend to come again next year.

Research and Shared Learning Projects (SLPs)

Transport for London Corporate Archives: Revealing the Past.

Throughout the lockdown periods, 3 members of London Region u3a worked to develop and refine TfL's Revealing the Past Transcription and Indexing Project. The project has been undertaken remotely, but this has been a bonus, because it enabled us to recruit members from all across the country as well as LR.

By the end of September 2022, thirty+ volunteers had transcribed 582 sets of minutes covering the early years of the Underground Electric Companies, and are currently indexing and cataloguing them all, so that the contents can be made available to the public for interest and research.

In addition, they are recording, collating and developing a number of interesting topics arising from our transcriptions for future research.

The last phase will be to submit articles/ information directly onto the TfL website. This year's project will end on 14th December, when we hope to have an actual face to face meeting at TfL's HQ in Stratford. A further project is planned for 2023. Several of the current volunteers will carry on with different sets of Minute books and we plan that they will support and encourage new recruits.

Brunel Museum: The brief was to research the lives of the workers who dug the tunnels and the many labourers and craftsmen who supported the tunnellers. The research provided information for a new exhibition and now provides personal interest stories for the guides to share with visitors.

The Guardian Foundation: 'Transcription of the Clyde Sanger Shorthand Notebooks' – project completed successfully and available on their website.

Kingston University: Cary Ellison Theatre Programme Collection – a good number of volunteers submitted research on their local theatres past and present; presentation on university archives website. The South West London Consortium has embarked on a further project with Kingston University Archives, using the actual theatre programmes, to investigate the social issues, trends, and influences arising from the advertisements in the programmes.

Kew Gardens Register Books: "Travelling Plants, Volunteers from u3a have taken part in a collaborative project to transcribe, research and encode the first of Kew Gardens' Register Books (1793-1809), funded by The National Archives. They worked with staff from Kew Gardens and the

University of Roehampton to create a digital edition of a key source for the history of botany in Britain. For more information, email us at: TravellingPlants@kew.org

High Street project: a 2 year national research project starting in September 2020 with local street surveys and repeated in September 2021. Baseline data was gathered on about 2000 premises. LRU3A provided administrative and technical support such as data analysis and assistance to volunteers to input their findings (including photos) into a pictorial database using iBase software. The project has spawned a variety of Shared Learning Projects -- local, regional and national. The report and database was launched for u3a's 40th birthday. IBase is available for u3a to use for 10 years. The project has been challenging on a number of fronts, but has contributed significantly to digital upskilling of u3a members nationally.

External Research

Requests from external researchers are still well below the rate of approaches back in 2019 and earlier and are very mixed. Some remain on line, others still require full covid precautions (it's never clear if they really want this or just haven't updated their notes). And others are verging on the commercial or make unreasonable demands on potential participants, so this year more requests have been turned down than agreed to. The day of the routine request for an hour of someone's time on a computer or answering questions verbally seems to be over.

National Events

We have continued to draw on the individual presentations, workshops and tutorials developed and delivered nationally to support u3a committees and post holders, and freely available from the u3a office. Topics have included:

- 'Beacon for Networks'
- 'Use of Social Media'
- 'Diversity, Equality and Inclusion'
- 'Finance Matters'

Succession Planning

LRU3A has had another positive year, and we would like to thank all of our colleagues for their contributions to the Executive Committee, Peer Support Group and Summer School Sub-committee. Many thanks also to all the u3a representatives who have attended meetings and workshops and contributed to the lively discussions.

How we all contribute will determine our continuing sustainability. You will have noticed that we still have a number of vacancies. We need more volunteers to help with a variety of tasks to support our constitutional obligations, aims and objectives – ultimately, to support London u3as. We need representatives from a good geographical spread of u3as across our region -- if you have some spare time, please join us!

We would like to end with a thank you to those stepping down this year for their service to LRU3A – Jim Jenkins and Rodney Fox. Also, although we are not losing him completely, a thanks to John Bent for his role as our Regional Trustee for the last few years.

With best wishes for the coming year,

Jenny Wilson, Vice Chair (South of Thames) and
Derek Harwood, Vice Chair (North of Thames)
October 2022