



Learn, laugh, live

The U3A National High Street Project

A major national U3A research project is under way which will look initially at local high streets before and after Covid-19, with the main survey taking place in September.

U3A members are being asked to register [now](#) so that they can record details of premises in their local high streets and shopping areas in September, gathering information about businesses that were trading at the end of March. Members are being asked to walk down their local high street (whatever this may be called), take notes of what businesses there are and take photos of the shop fronts. This information will be fed into a database with September 2020 as the base line.

Researchers can then revisit the same high streets in 18 months' time to note any changes that have taken place. The findings, including anecdotes from U3A members who recall high streets of the past, will form a landmark report for publication by the Trust in 2022, so helping to raise the U3A's profile in its 40th anniversary year.

Activities undertaken by U3A members include Research, Shared Learning projects, Local History and Living History. This means that after the initial survey has been completed, members can pursue their interests in any local area which has been surveyed, creating a longitudinal study – a research design that involves repeated observations of the same variables (eg people) over short or long periods of time (ie it uses longitudinal data). These are of necessity local projects which will be initiated, designed and run by local U3As.

The project was dreamt up before Lockdown by Peter Cox of North London U3A and a member of the U3A National Research Network. With a former career in retail, he was interested in comparing today's high streets with those of the past.

However, the Pandemic means the project either had to be abandoned or re-purposed. This means the information needs to be gathered as quickly as possible since people may not remember what shops were there before Covid-19 struck. If just ten per cent of U3As take part, that would be a significant amount of information.

The rise of internet shopping and more office workers working permanently from home are just two of the reasons that high streets and towns could change in the future. Fewer office workers and commuters will have an effect on cafés and sandwich shops, while many people who have mastered online shopping may continue to do that into the future.

"So what happens to the businesses after Lockdown?" asks Peter. "There'll be some winners: some people may prefer to shop in their local parade rather than go into town or to a shopping mall, where social distancing is more difficult. We may find new usages for our high streets. We want to be able to show these changes."

"We don't know precisely how our shopping areas will change in the long term, but we do know the effects in many places will be dramatic. By the end of the survey, we will be better able to answer the specific question: *How exactly has COVID-19 changed the places where we shop?*

There are many other projects taking place on this topic but the U3A project will be unique in that it will be the only one where individual U3As, groups of U3As or local Networks, have created separate projects as a result of the survey. Mike Klein who is a principal at shops2020 and a U3A member has worked with Peter on the pilot surveys to advise on best practice.

[There's still time for you to volunteer to take part in this monumental project.](#)

For more details about how to take part, please complete the Registration Form that you can find [here](#) or go to (<https://u3alondonregion.wufoo.com/forms/s175dvl040lqop/>).

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