

The National U3A High Street Project

Background

My name is Peter Cox, from North London U3A. I'm a member of the U3A Research Network and have been asked by Ian McCannah to seek the help of Regional Trustees to launch this national research project, to which the Covid-19 pandemic has given a sudden urgency.

This summer it has become very clear that Lockdown will lead to profound changes in shopping habits. As a consequence every shopping area seems certain to look very different, very soon, which will fundamentally affect local communities in ways nobody can yet anticipate.

The project's being managed by the Trust's National Research Subcommittee. The plan is to produce a landmark report for publication by the Trust in 2022, so helping to raise the U3A's profile in our 40th anniversary year.

This Autumn

The Project will begin with a quick survey to give us a baseline at the beginning of Lockdown in March 2020, against which we'll be able to measure the changes. The timescale is of necessity short because the situation is changing rapidly. I appreciate that Regional Trustees are already stretched, and that many of you are stepping down at the AGM, but I'd be very grateful for your help, as soon as possible, in encouraging selected U3As in your region to participate in a simple survey during September.

We aim to produce a report for the Board by the end of December 2020 that describes the pre-Pandemic state of Britain's shopping locations. In early 2022 we'll then be able to construct a final report that looks in depth at the impact of the Pandemic, as part of wider research.

The U3A Volunteers' Task

We would ask participants to choose a small number of shopping streets in their locality. That might mean for example a main street, a local parade, and a small centre. They would walk along them, noting down three items of data about each property: street number, name, and type (e.g. 171-5, Budgens, supermarket), and photographing the shopfront. They do the next stage at home. We'll provide a list of 'property type' codes, and a simple form on which they'll enter their data and the matching code. We'd like the majority of volunteers to complete and submit their data by the end of September. From our own trials we calculate that a pair of U3A members can survey a street of 100 shops in two hours and do the data entry at home in half a day.

What we're asking you to do

We appreciate that there are variations between Regions, so you will know how best to achieve what's required in yours. That is: to identify a minimum of a dozen U3As, each with around 5-10 volunteers, willing to participate in the data recording exercise during September. Please ask each U3A to send me a Project Leader contact name and email. We will send them a link to an online volunteer registration form to be completed, ideally by the end of August, so that we can send out the information packs in time for volunteers to complete the recording by the end of September. All personal data will of course be subject to standard U3A Data Protection regulations.

Conclusion

This has the potential to prove a really influential study, one that will eventually allow every U3A the opportunity to contribute. We do hope you agree, and can find the time, in your already busy schedule, to encourage U3As in your Region to contribute to this vital preliminary survey in September – and help us to get it right.