

U3A CHAIRS' FORUM MEETING NOTES 25 MARCH 2024

98 Chairs in attendance.

OVERVIEW OF SURVEY & DISCUSSION

Participants in both the meeting and the survey were generally supportive of the principle of introducing a representative Council alongside a smaller Board but raised significant concerns over the lack of information about how this might work in practice. Chairs are looking for a more complete proposal before making a decision and there is broad support for a delay to allow this to happen. This would give the Trust a fuller opportunity to have the views of u3as considered and addressed in an updated and more complete proposal.

The meeting identified several areas which, if addressed, would assist u3as in making an informed decision. These included:

- Identifying the practical benefits to u3as, e.g. support, promotion.
- Clarification of the responsibilities and workloads of representatives and how representatives would support larger regions and nations.
- Identifying effective mechanisms for u3as to communicate with the Council and influence both Council and Board proposals.
- Addressing concerns over the large number of representatives and Council attendees and the potential negative impact on its effectiveness.
- Defining the role and decision-making authority of the Council, its areas of authority and relationship with the Board, particularly in setting budgets and directing resources.
- Clarification over the full costs of the proposal, including the time and commitment of volunteers.

Conclusion:

Opinions on whether the proposal should go ahead in its current form were divided between the majority who wanted more information before deciding and those who support moving ahead without delay.

Reflecting the majority view, and assuming that a revised proposal and consultation is likely to take several months, the recommendation is to delay the decision on whether to move ahead with the current proposal until the areas where significant information is missing or have raised concerns amongst u3as have been understood and the incorporated into the proposal.

MEETING NOTES

SUMMARY OF SURVEY

The meeting opened with a presentation of the recent survey distributed to the 430 members of the Chairs' Forum (around 400 u3a Chairs). There were 121 responses (24% response). The survey was sent out on 13 March and closed on 24 March 2024.

The main findings were:

1. 70% of respondents agree in principle with the concept of a separate Council and a smaller, experience-based Board with 20% remaining undecided.
2. Half of the survey participants feel they possess enough information for their committee to make a decision but 20% identify significant gaps in the information provided.
3. The survey indicates a wide spread of views as to the powers the Council should have, with a quarter of respondents placing it at the highest end of the range of having wide powers and holding the Trust to account.

There were two open questions and the opportunity to make comments which are to be passed to the Third Age Trust for inclusion in the consultation feedback. The weight of comments highlighted:

- A clear short summary from the Board why the change is needed and what benefits are there for individual u3as.
- What powers this new Council will have and how much influence they will have.
- Much clearer and more complete information about how members of the Board and Council would be recruited/selected/elected and about the role and delegated authority.
- How the Council intends to feed back its decisions and actions in response to questions posed by u3as.

The presentation and summary of survey comments will be circulated with the notes of the meeting.

DISCUSSION

Consultation process & engagement

It was pointed out that there had been numerous presentations to explain the changes and give members the opportunity to ask questions, many of which may have been raised in the survey. The questionnaire did not enquire whether respondents had attended on of the presentations.

Some Chairs had not received the notification about presentations and so could not attend. [Note that the Trust has offered to run additional presentations – contact chair@u3a.org.uk]

The way questions raised in presentation meetings had been handled, prompted some negative comments as they had not been answered in a helpful manner.

Half a dozen Chairs reported that their committees are disinterested in these proposals, and it is proving difficult to engage them in the debate.

Council representation

With their commitment required to cover the potentially large geographical areas to be covered the issue of the number of representatives in larger regions was raised. A Chair reported that the Trust had said there is no intention to change the current region/nation arrangements.

One concern was the size of the Council and how this could impact on its effectiveness. The proposal identifies a Council of 30 or more individuals, with the 24 region and nation representative, 3 Network Link representatives, a representative from the Board and the Chairs of

the 3 strategy groups in attendance, prompting the comment, 'if you have a committee of 30 people, you'll never get anything done'.

There were also concerns raised in the chat about the number of volunteers, asking, where a further 30 volunteers will appear from?

The issue of communications between the Council and u3as was raised suggesting that having a larger number of elected people to discuss u3a issues doesn't really help the problem of communications. With up to 1,000 u3as there needs to be a much better mechanism to find out what their priorities are and get u3as involved in decision-making. The speaker recognised that this is a challenge because most are focussed on their local u3as and local problems, but viewed having a mechanism in place as absolutely essential if the Council is to solve any of the problems.

Cost of proposals

The question had been asked in a presentation, how much is the Council going to cost, taking the view that given the size of the Council it would inevitably impact on costs. The Trust had indicated that with a smaller Board and the Council holding only a few face-to-face meetings, the net budget would not be impacted.

However, the presenter from the Trust had also commented that the Council budget would benefit because of its volunteer nature. One speaker pointed out that this devalues their contribution and, although volunteers give their time freely and willingly, that comes with a cost. That cost, be it emotional or social or financial, ought to be acknowledged and built into proposals – a bigger Council means more members investing more time if it's going to work.

Council decision-making authority

The lack of information on decision-making authority of the Council and the boundaries between Council and Board had been raised at a presentation and the Trust had responded that the Council's decision-making remit would need to be defined.

This prompted the question as to what is a u3a matter and what is a Trust Board matter?

It was acknowledged that there is clearly going to have to be a boundary set and to know what the two entities are going to do and how they going to fit together. This is not yet clear.

Board & Board responsibilities

There were a few comments about the reformed Board, noting that the proposals see it being composed of a smaller number of individuals selected for their skills and experience. Several Chairs expressed their support for this.

The importance of the Board addressing the issues that the Charity Commission deem important was acknowledged. However, the meeting was reminded that the purpose of a charity is to do public good and if the Board focussed on governance issues rather than u3a and u3a members, which is being left to the Council, this might be a case of 'the tail wagging the dog'.

It was recognised that the Board, because of legal requirements will always be the most senior decision-making body within the Trust, and the question was asked, what do we think about that Board not having representatives elected from regions and nations?

Accountability

The view was expressed that if the Council has no authority, then it's just a talking shop, noting that the information provided to date has not been explicit on the matter. It was noted that if the Board

makes all the decisions on finances and basically plans of how resources are used, it could end up having even less insight into what u3as want and called for a better description of what is intended.

The survey indicated that a quarter of respondents would want the Council to have wide powers and hold the Trust to account. Similar views were expressed in the meeting. This was challenged and the point made that any Board is held to account through an annual general meeting.

It was pointed out that with a Council having many representatives that discuss everything relating to the interests of u3as and having some powers to solve some issues, would enable them to focus on u3as rather than trying to hold the Board to account.

In drawing attention to the significant number of survey respondents who feel that the Council should have more rather than less powers, the comment was made that with power comes responsibility and it's only the Board of Trustees that have the responsibility and liability in terms of the Third Age Trust and suggested that the Council needs to be a body that makes recommendations which go forward to the Board for decision. If the Board decides not to implement such a recommendation, it must account back to the Council as to why cannot implement that recommendation.

Rationale for change

The Trust has said that the Board has a problem and things need fixing; that the Board can't 'hobble along and hope for the best'. It was commented that u3as need to know what the Board thinks they're aiming at with the proposal – whether they feel that this proposal is going to do the job?

Surprise was expressed by some Chairs that after 40 years u3a does not have a Board-Council structure. In other charities, there is a Board of Trustees and then a Council. The Board of Trustees make the strategic decisions for the organisation and then the Council or some similar body directs the work of the charity.

It was noted that other charities are organised in the way that is being proposed and if the decision is made so u3as can vote on the proposals at the AGM, the details can be sorted out later.

Attention was drawn to the fact that this is the third time since the beginning of 2000, that a proposal to amend the governance structure has been floated. On the previous two occasions, the general view has not been in favour. One member wondered if the decision not to proceed may have to do with the principle of u3a being a 'sharing and caring' organisation, rather than one that is centralised.

One Chair noted that given positive support for the principle of a Council and Board, would there be better transparency from having a Council in place? Are u3as still going to be able to see what the accounts are like? They pointed out that the Council is proposed to make some contribution to the annual budgeting in terms of advice, but it's still very vague.

Referring to the recruitment and promotion resolution for which was passed at the 2023 AGM, one member asked does anyone know if the Trust or the Board or anybody has done any work on that?

It was reported that a plan outlining promotional activity for the next 12 months had been presented to the pilot Council meeting in February and as announced in the recent Friends newsletter, there is shortly to be a short-term radio advertising program plan on Boom radio, but also commented that progress could have been communicated better.

Information

One Chair commented that there are things about the proposal that members feel have not been addressed and, while this has been acknowledged in presentations from the Trust, there are areas that are not clear or where u3as are not happy about.

This was reinforced by the results of the survey which identified a need to provide more information and whilst u3as might hold views about whether they think the principal of the Council and Board is a good idea or not, there's a lot of missing information that would help making a decision should u3as be asked to vote at the October AGM.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the proposal, it was suggested there might be benefit in proposing to the Trust that they slow the process down and do not try to put it to an AGM this year but spend more time working towards achieving a consensus.

Participants were asked if they are in favour or against a delay.

There were 61 responses, of which 44 were in favour of a delay (72%) and 17 against a delay (28%).

Chairs gave their reasons for their view.

For a delay:

Because a number of people are said that they haven't had the chance to hear any presentation so let's have a little bit longer for people to have a listen and have a think about what they want to do.

There's no point in having more discussion until we have more concrete information. A number of people said quite rightly how the proposals at the moment are quite vague especially in terms of decision-making on behalf of the proposed Council. We can go on discussing in this way but until we have more concrete information that discussion is going to go round in circles.

Partly because with the changes in Chief Executive and Chair I think one would need the new occupants of these responsibilities to have time to get their feet under the table before irrevocable decisions are taken.

Against a delay:

How long do we need discussing this? Let's try it and see how it goes. The majority, 70%, said they were for the proposals.

It would mean putting off a decision for another year.

In responding to a comment made about the survey results, it was noted that as any changes to the Trust Articles of Association would need approval of 75% of votes cast. Whilst 70% of survey respondents are, in principle, in favour, 20% feel there is important information missing that would help with making a final decision on the proposal.

A Chair commented that any decision to put a resolution to the AGM has got to be, not one of principle, but one giving a proper structure. Without a proper structure, it is still airy fairy and u3as won't know what's going to come from it.

Should the proposal move forward to an AGM, the resolution is expected to focus on amending the Trust Articles to move from Board-only governance to establishing a Board-Council structure. If, for example, in 5 years' time the structure had not met expectations, this would have to be reversed, arguing for u3as having a clearer understanding of how the Council would function before making a decision.

It was suggested this might include providing more information on the benefit to u3as, the relationship between Council and Board, how communication between u3as and the Council might work, the role of representatives within the regions and nations, the expected responsibilities and workload of representatives, etc.

Supporting this view, the comment was also made that the proposal sorts out the Board and leaves the Council floundering around to find its fate and called on the Trust to present more complete proposals for the Council focusing on what it will do and how it will support u3as.

Consultation feedback

The question was asked as to who it is that drafts the proposals? Is it u3as, and the Board decides how to respond?

It was reported that there is a steering group made up of Board members with support from the Office and this committee has been responsible for pulling the information together.

This prompted a further question of how the views of u3as are to be communicated and suggested that the process would benefit from more of a dialogue with u3as. It was noted that the issue of responsive communication has been mentioned in a number of the Forum meetings.

Chairs were reminded that any comments, whether positive or negative, could be sent to governance@u3a.org.uk saying this should be done as soon as possible and certainly before the end of April otherwise the Board may not have all the relevant information when it comes to making a decision.