

Chairman's Report for the period from September 2020 to July 2021

This is my first annual report as chairman, and what a year it has been.

When I was elected chairman at the 2020 AGM, the Committee was already learning how to tackle the various issues facing all u3as. The Third Age Trust has issued guidance regularly, setting out how u3as should respond to announcements from Government. We have taken great care to make sure we comply with the guidelines, both for the safety of our members and because the insurance cover provided to u3as nationally required us to do this. Achieving this was not just down to the Committee however. Our group leaders, and all our individual members, had parts to play too. So thank you to everyone for doing their part.

One major development has been the widespread adoption of Zoom. Encouraged by the Third Age Trust, u3as around the country learned to appreciate what a useful tool Zoom could be for allowing meetings to take place online.

Although the use of Zoom was encouraged, this was of course optional and decisions on whether or not to use it were left to the leaders and members of each group. Some activities were well suited to this new means of meeting, but by no means all. We ended up paying for three Zoom licences, and I think even those members who are not very keen on it would agree it has been a lot better than nothing.

Most of you will recall that we extended the 2019/20 membership year to 31 December 2020 in response to the impact of Covid on our activities. We then asked for a greatly reduced membership fee of £15 for the period from January to August 2021. We were pleased that more than 600 members paid this, and quite a few of those who chose not to renew their membership contacted us to say they expected to re-join with effect from September this year, if conditions had returned to something approaching normal by then. We look forward to welcoming them back.

Further, 39 new members have joined our u3a since the start of September 2020, and a few new groups have started too. Many u3as have found the last 16 months or so very difficult, so your committee is very encouraged by these numbers and we are all grateful for everyone's support. Thank you.

Something we have discovered is that attendance at monthly meetings has generally increased since these went online. Various factors may have contributed to this, including the absence of any need to travel and the difficulty of doing other things during lockdown. As we do not know how many members will be happy to attend face to face meetings again when we restart in September, the committee has decided to hold both physical and virtual monthly meetings during the final quarter of this year. We hope this will give us a better idea of what members will prefer in 2022. We are also looking into the possibility of holding so-called hybrid meetings, where physical meetings can be attended remotely by members who are unwilling or simply unable to attend in person.

While on the subject of monthly meetings, we were venturing into the unknown when we started to hold these meetings online, but it has worked well. The highlight to my mind was guest speaker Tony Harris's portrayal of Henry VIII, and I am delighted to say he will be appearing again later this year, in a different guise.

Despite the impact of the pandemic, various developments give me hope for what the future holds for our u3a. New groups have started, new members have been joining and we had three members express an interest in joining the committee. U3as do not run themselves and there are various people I want to thank:

- All of our group leaders, who I think are the lifeblood of a u3a.

- Brenda Austin, who acts as the minutes secretary for the Committee. The work that Brenda does goes unseen by everyone who is not on the Committee, but she prepares the minutes with extraordinary efficiency.
- All the Committee members, including Ian Stimpson who stepped down from the Committee earlier this year, for their hard work in helping us to cope with unprecedented circumstances.

Many u3as around the country have suffered sharp falls in membership due to Covid, but I think we have fared relatively well. This reflects a real team effort by the Committee and we in turn are grateful to the members who have stayed with us during these challenging times. If you know anyone who was a member last year but chose not to renew back in January, please remind them that we will soon be issuing renewal invitations for 2021/22 and very much hope that they will re-join our u3a. There is strength in numbers.