

Chairman's Report for the Chorleywood U3A AGM – 25th November 2020

I hereby present the annual report for the year 2019/20.

As you all know only too well this year – at least since March 2020 - has been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting restrictions introduced to control the number of people affected by it. Along with all U3As our demographic is such that we have been particularly affected.

In March it was necessary to suspend our planned programme of educational visits to places of interest and theatre visits and this remains the case. At the same time we also suspended the holding of face-to-face group meetings either in members' homes or hired halls. There was some hope that we might resume meetings in Covid-secure halls this autumn, but this proved not to be possible as the second-wave numbers increased. For the moment groups of up to six people are allowed to meet in members' homes provided that a risk assessment is undertaken, and suitable precautions taken. Of course this situation could change in the event of our area being re-classified to tier-2, or a national lockdown being re-introduced. In any event the numbers in most of our groups exceed six.

When it became clear that the restrictions would not be lifted in the short-term it was necessary to look for alternative ways to keep groups active. We subscribed to two Chorleywood U3A Zoom accounts for use by members and groups and while this is not suitable for all groups, over twenty-five of them have taken this opportunity.

In May we experimentally held a Zoom-based monthly meeting with one of our members, Fiona Matheson, as speaker. This proved successful and we have held the meetings monthly since then, and will continue to do so for as long as is necessary.

During the year we were successful in reclaiming Gift Aid contributions for the last three years. This strengthened our financial position and enabled us to offer a reduced subscription rate to members renewing before the end of our year. I am delighted that so many took advantage of this offer (see below). I thank Chris Higbee, Mike Field and Dee Watson for the work they put in to achieving this.

2020 marks our 10th anniversary as a U3A. We had a series of events planned to celebrate including an open day to showcase the U3A locally and to coincide with the first national U3A day, a full study day, and most importantly a 10th anniversary party. Much work went into planning these days, but sadly all had to be shelved. While it is too early to forecast what 2021 will bring, it is our intention, if at all possible, that these events have been only postponed, and will take place as a 10+1 celebration next year.

424 members have renewed their subscription for 2020/21, which in the circumstances we think is an excellent outcome (at around 90% this is similar to previous years). During lockdown we temporarily suspended accepting new membership applications. However a small number have put their names down, and we will now approach these to confirm they still wish to join. Depending on the situation at the time we hope to undertake a recruitment drive next spring or summer.

I thank Dee Watson for continuing to manage our membership in such an efficient manner.

Groups

Our groups had continued to grow and flourish pre-Covid. We had 52 regular groups and another four occasional ones. Two new groups were launched during the early part of the year: Apple Users with leader Sheena King and Line Dancing with qualified tutor Ellie Redding and organised by Jill Menghetti. Both proved popular from the start. We have three groups waiting in the wings: Fun with Card and Board Games, Folk Music Appreciation and Poetry to be led by Lizzie Batten, Mary Wilde and Valerie Newberry respectively. We lost Scrabble 2, which Carol Trinder had started and run for a few months – for which we thank her very much, and our Amblers walking group is suspended until a new leader comes forward.

Thank you to all our leaders for working very hard since the start of the pandemic to continue their group meetings actively. As mentioned before the most popular means has been via the virtual Zoom platform and many members who believed they ‘couldn’t do technology’ are now chatting away happily and sharing presentations! Others have relied on WhatsApp, email and telephone calls to keep in contact with their members. Some, when the weather was better, have also managed to meet socially distanced in gardens.

The Striders’ two walking groups, organised by Nick Hood, Alun Price-Davies and Andrew York, and the tai chi sessions run by Gordon Ross continue to operate, adhering to all the latest government rules and guidance. Table tennis, led by Joy Clews, recently started again in a Covid-secure way - singles only - at William Penn Leisure Centre. These leaders have put in a tremendous amount of work to run these groups safely, and we greatly appreciate that.

We have also held a number of Zoom meetings for group leaders to share ideas and keep in touch. Pre- Covid these events included a delicious lunch but sadly that will now have to wait.

I thank Tricia King and Jill Menghetti, our Group Co-ordinators for all their work during this challenging year.

Events

Dave Carter and Colin Lines took over responsibility for arranging our educational visits and before lockdown commenced we took the Royal Opera House backstage tour with 33 participants. Unfortunately another 4 visits that were booked had to be cancelled and future visits are on hold until it is safe for us to recommence and the sites themselves are open again.

Main meetings

At the start of the year we had excellent talks in the Memorial Hall from our members Nick Hood and Colin Gent. As mentioned above after a hiatus of two months we restarted the meetings using Zoom in May with another member Fiona Matheson telling us about the World of Beekeeping. The Zoom meetings have continued with a good attendance – if you haven’t yet joined one please give it a try. Few who attended will forget Annabel Leventon’s evocation of the seventies in ‘The Real Rock Follies’.

I thank Gillian Pugh and Andrew York for their work as Programme Secretaries organising a varied cast of speakers, and to Mike Field and Robin Hurley for their technical support before lockdown and advice since.

In Memoriam

Erica Hiddleston, John Moss, Angela Triplett, Mike Head, Remo MacLaurin, Vicky Bernays, David Ward, Donald MacLean, Ron Rolfe (former member).

Our sympathy to their families and friends.

Local and national links

The Herts Network has continued to meet virtually, though its activities have necessarily been curtailed. Meetings with smaller groups of local U3As have been sidelined but I keep in touch informally with many of our neighbours. As one of the first U3As to hold Monthly Meetings virtually we were able to provide advice and encouragement to others considering this step. The TAT National Conference this year was cancelled but I attended the AGM online.

The Committee

As with others we have had to get used to meeting online. Earlier in the year Julia Pich resigned due to the pressure of her other commitments, and Colin Lines will also be standing down at the end of this year. I want to thank them for their efforts and offers to help organise events in the future. Georgie Barton, Colin Brown, Dave Carter, Chris Higbee, Gillian Hill, Tricia King, Jill Menghetti, Gillian Pugh, Katina Smith, and Dee Watson have all provided good advice and support to me during this difficult year.

2021

We don't know if the experience we have been through these last few months will be in that awful phrase 'the new normal' or if in a year's time we will be able to look back on this as a blip. What I am confident in is that our U3A with all your help and contributions will continue to thrive.