



## Chair's Report 2021 -22

In my report for our last AGM I described 2020-21 as the Covid year, so I suppose 2021-22 could reasonably be called the 'recovering from Covid' year. Virtually all of our groups are running as normal, and after an initial sharp drop because of Covid, our membership numbers are gradually creeping up again. The many benefits that our u3a provides, especially the opportunity to see u3a friends on a regular basis, are fully available and members are making good use of these. The range of activities we offer to members is enormous, and must surely have a huge impact on our mental and emotional health.

At our last AGM we approved a Code of Practice, which functions as an extension to our Constitution but allows us to make significant changes more easily than changing our Constitution. Amongst other things, it allows us to have electronic or hybrid meetings. Our last AGM was held as a hybrid meeting, with electronic voting in advance and a short face to face meeting. That seemed remarkably successful, with a high participation figure, which is why we are repeating that format for this year's AGM. One of the proposals for this AGM is to extend the Code of Practice to include a section on finance, making it clear the u3a cannot provide specific benefits to individual members, including Committee members (i.e. the Trustees).

Our AGM is being held slightly later than usual this year, in February rather than in November. The reason for this is that our new financial year begins in September, and it takes a minimum of two months to finalise the previous year's accounts and have them independently examined. For a face to face meeting in November that timescale is manageable (just). However for a hybrid meeting documents need to be prepared much earlier, and this has led to the slightly later date for the AGM.

The past year has seen some important changes in our fee structure. A working group of six people (four Committee and two non-Committee members) spent many hours reviewing the current arrangements and proposing a set of changes to the fee structure. Since any changes would have to be implemented by Group Leaders, the proposals were discussed at length with Group Leaders before any decisions were made. The two most significant changes that have been introduced are:

- Session fees can be paid in advance for all groups, and where members pay for a block of sessions in advance a discount is applied
- Groups that do not cover at least 50% of their costs are required to pay an increased session fee, unless other changes are made (such as reducing the length of sessions or moving to a cheaper venue), with Group Leaders being responsible for deciding the best way forward for their group.

In addition to these session fee changes, the annual membership fee also increased slightly. Trustees are determined to create a simple fee structure that maximises opportunities for participation for the maximum number of members, and we believe these changes will help us to do that. It is encouraging that the responses to these changes have been extremely positive.

The venues we use locally have all been hit by the double blow of reduced income because of Covid and massively increased energy costs. We can see that venue charges are increasing, and these may well result in slightly increased session fees in the near future. Membership numbers are recovering steadily, getting closer to the total that they were before Covid, and this should help us to maintain our relatively low fees for as long as possible. Thanks are due to our recently

retired treasurer, Richard Thorne, who took over at very short notice two years ago, for keeping our finances in such good shape; also to Keith Saywell, who took over as treasurer from Richard partway through the year.

Our venues and groups co-ordinators are partway through a major review of venues, especially in relation to members' safety. We can expect certain minimum standards in terms of facilities and safety procedures, and Trustees will soon be discussing and acting on recommendations from the venues and groups co-ordinators. However we have to be realistic in what we expect from our venues, many of which are run by volunteers, and finding the right balance isn't easy or obvious. Thanks are due to Sharon Ginnis, who has done a great job as venues co-ordinator over the past year but will be standing down at the AGM. We look forward to working with her replacement.

One of these recommendations about members' safety will refer to how we can get in contact with venue managers at short notice, not simply by email. There have been a number of situations where this has created problems for us. For example, having booked the Town Hall months in advance for a Members Meeting on Monday 3 January 2022, those of us who turned up discovered that the Town Hall was closed because that day was a bank holiday! Fortunately members were able to enjoy a free drink and chat at Chatwins coffee shop over the road, which rescued the situation for us, but it highlighted the need to have phone numbers that we can use in 'emergency' situations.

Members meetings generally continue to be well supported and appreciated by members. Trustees are committed to maintaining free admittance to members' meetings, but we do now make a donation box available for members who want to donate towards the cost of the meeting, including refreshments. The membership renewal days at Sandbach Rugby Club also provided a welcome opportunity for coffee and a chat to friends, as did the successful sign up day at the Wesley Centre in August.

After opening its doors for the first time in September 2003, our u3a celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2023. We had planned three days of celebratory events on 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of May, with a legacy donation of £2,000 being used to support our celebrations. However the new king has chosen 6<sup>th</sup> May as his coronation date, so it will be difficult to go ahead on those dates as we planned. Instead we will have a 'coming of age' 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebration in May 2024.

Events such as these require a lot of organisation. We are fortunate to have a group of Trustees who are committed to working in the best interests of members, ably supported by a big group of volunteers who are willing to turn up to help in all sorts of practical ways. My thanks go to all of them on your behalf.

Stuart Naylor

Chair, Sandbach & District u3a