



CHAIR'S REPORT 2023

For my first annual report I want to tackle three areas:

- **The successes of the year**
- **The issue of Reserves**
- **One noteworthy failure**

The Successes of the Year

- **New Members**
 - During the year membership rose from approximately 650 who renewed in 2022 to 730 by September 2023 – a record high and a fantastic tribute to the convenors and open meeting teams who make our organisation so attractive.
- **New Groups**
 - Two large groups took wing at the end of the year after much planning by their respective convenors, Pickleball and Film Interest. A Scrabble Group re-formed and the Groups which started at the beginning of the year are all flourishing, Dippers, Singing for Fun, Play Reading, Environment and Climate. Inevitably one or two groups have withered on the vine, and we regrettably decided after much heart searching that we could not support groups lead by a paid leader and so had to part company with the Yoga group, popular, successful and growing though it was. The legal requirements covering employment law, tax etc. are onerous and we would need someone on the Management Committee to head this up (see my remarks below). It is an area we may revisit if we can find the resource.

- Governance

- The new constitution has been in place since the last AGM. It is largely a reflection of Charity Commission Requirements and Guidance. This year we have updated our bye-laws to reflect how things will be run locally in our own trust, acknowledging that the Constitution always has primacy. Though a fairly arduous task hopefully it will guide us with little more than the occasional tweak for years to come.
- We have formalized the arrangements for keeping group finances and the treasurer aligned. This gives extra transparency to the funds that we hold centrally for some groups and should give confidence to all.
- With the ending of the Covid venue cost support at the end of the year, Groups will have the opportunity to consider how they want to arrange their finances for the future. I would emphasise that any group with concerns should talk to the Treasurer or Group Coordinator. We are very keen to see the changes happen as seamlessly as possible.
- I would like to acknowledge the success of my predecessor Steven and his team at the time, in their Covid supporting arrangements, whether by subsidising venues or supporting online arrangements. We are now at record membership levels. Many u3as are still struggling.

- Volunteers

- It is a fundamental Tenet of the u3a organisation that it is volunteer led and run. The backbone of the organisation, the cadres of Convenors, Open Group organisers and the support Groups who back these activities up. I would like on behalf of all members to extend my thanks to all of them - we are very lucky to have you. I would also like to thank the Trustees who are also the executive Management Committee, a task that is rewarding as well as occasionally frustrating, but without whom the u3a would literally not exist. More on this later.

- Digitisation

- We have made great strides this year with members successfully converting to the no cheques, no cash regime for membership renewal, which is a huge benefit in terms of administration and a significant cash saving. Most new members are now joining online.

- More and more groups are now keeping membership up to date on Beacon, and there will be a drive to extend this during the year ahead. It should enable us to dispose of the annual audit and have a much better handle on waiting lists in the future. Full digitalization of the membership process next year should allow us to save again on postage costs and administration.
- Finally, the website is being upgraded this year, and Petersfield (specifically John Donlan) was selected as one of the 20 u3as who have been evaluating the proposed changes. It is expected we will see significant improvements before the year is out.

One Major Unresolved Issue – Reserves

- Current Situation
 - We have for many years been carrying unnecessarily large reserves currently in the order of £30k
 - We have kept it on hold during Covid and whilst we checked on the impact of inflation.
 - In fact, savings in administration and increased members have offset increases.
 - We now need to manage proactively.
- The Plan
 - As previously announced, we plan to review reserves policy in the New Year.
 - Current thinking would involve a one-off delay of membership renewal to early spring 2025 followed by a significant reduction in annual membership fee until reserves hit a new level yet to be agreed but possibly of the order of say £10k.
 - Separates year end from membership renewal (currently major pain for the treasurer)
 - Would reduce income by approximately £5000 in 2023-2025 and £4000pa thereafter.

One Noteworthy Failure - No Increase in Management Committee (Trustee) numbers

- Numbers
 - We have successfully recruited a new Treasurer and a Membership Secretary with the incumbents due to retire this year; however Committee membership numbers have dropped by one to seven over the course of this year.
 - The ratio of Management Committee (MC) members to total u3a members is virtually half what it was four years ago. It is slightly less than 1 per 100 members at present.
 - Every MC member has a substantive role in running the organisation and there is no real capacity for development.
 - Furthermore, apart from short-term cover there is no capacity to fill a gap if we lose a member.
 - Robina our secretary retires this year and we must find a replacement – it is both a requirement legally and a requirement functionally.
- Consequences
 - We may need to pause new membership.
 - We run the risk of not having sufficient numbers to keep the trust running.
 - At the very least we are constraining our ability to grow and enhance the u3a experience.
- Plan
 - To involve you, the members, particularly those in volunteer leadership roles; Convenors, Rota organisers etc., but in truth everybody, in the mission to recruit new MC members. You will be the people who know who might do the role and indeed I would ask you all to seriously consider it yourselves. If you know someone who you think might do it talk to them or suggest a member of the committee approach them. Advertising and pleas do not work – it is your organisation not ours, so please help it go from strength to strength.
- The Role – Dispelling the Myths
 - Being a trustee is a serious but not particularly difficult role. It basically involves making sure the organisation is true to its objectives and ensuring

that the charity is run properly. There is lots of help available and we are all insured, so unless you knowingly or recklessly do something really stupid you have nothing to worry about! More complete and erudite descriptions can be found on the u3a or Charity Commission websites.

- We have a committed and diverse Management Committee (all trustees are on the Management Committee and vice versa). We all have perfectly normal lives and fit the role in around them. We meet about 8 or 9 times a year; most of the work takes place outside the committee meetings.
- No previous u3a experience is required though it helps if a number of the members have this, but a percentage of the team bringing in fresh thinking is important too. Almost everyone will have previous life experience which they will bring to the party. Yes, we would be interested but not yet, is a frequent but frustrating response to being asked!
- We are not alone
 - Many u3as have this problem, but not all. One u3a I found has twelve MC members for four hundred members, three times our ratio.
 - Many other charities in Petersfield have the same problem too.
 - So it is not easy, but it is verging on the existential so there is no option, we must have more members coming forward.

And Finally Next Year

- The two Key objectives of Reserve Policy Resolution and MC Recruitment have already been covered, the latter being the sine qua non for any more ambitious projects.
- We wish to prioritise improved two-way communication between the Committee, Activity Leaders and via them the rest of the membership, to ensure that we are properly attuned to members' needs and better explaining what we are trying to achieve.
- If we crack all three whilst keeping the show on the road, I think we would be very happy.

Charles Price, Chair
October 2023

