



islington



Chair's report to AGM 2014

Islington U3A has had an amazing and successful first year. We were overwhelmed by the attendance at the inaugural meeting in October last year when 200 people queued to get in. We immediately had more members than we expected to achieve by the end of the first year and set up 28 interest groups from the beginning. In April, we became a full member of The Third Age Trust, the national umbrella organisation to which all local U3As belong, and we became a registered charity in May.

Monthly meetings

David Aaronovitch was the speaker at our first monthly meeting in November. He proved so popular that we had to move to a bigger venue to accommodate the 123 members who came. Following that exciting start, we continued with a wide range of distinguished speakers all of whom gave stimulating and engaging talks that attracted very large audiences.

Our groups

From the start, thanks to our wonderful group coordinators, we have had a wide selection of groups where we have been able to expand our knowledge and skills, make new friends and enjoy ourselves. By the end of the year, the number of groups had increased to 35 and we were already in the process of setting up a further batch.

Summer party

In the summer we ran our first social event for members, a party in Anna McKane's beautiful garden. Around 70 members enjoyed drinks and canapés and lots of lively conversation. The photograph on the website of Alan Cranston and Chris Bulford opening bottles of Prosecco definitely gives a new perspective on what Islington U3A is all about.

External links

We have also looked outwards to the wider community and established links with many local organisations, including community associations and Islington Age UK. In June, as part of Islington Giving Week, 12 of us walked all or part of the 16-mile borough boundary on a very, very hot day. It was a great way to see the full extent and variety of Islington while raising £250 to support

Islington Giving's excellent work. Perhaps it is something that will become an Islington U3A tradition.

National and local support

Setting up a U3A is quite a complex process but fortunately support and advice was available to us from The Third Age Trust. Our London Trustee, Gwen Wright, made sure that we followed the appropriate procedures and helped us become a recognised U3A. We are very grateful for the financial support for the initial setup from the Trust and from Islington Councillors Catherine West, Richard Watts, Janet Burgess and Martin Klute, who gave donations from their local ward funds and also Councillor John Gilbert, who gave a personal donation. The Third Age Trust has also given us a grant towards the cost of our Open Day in October. Most recently, we have obtained a grant from the Morris Charitable Trust to buy a laptop and projector and one from Islington Council's Community Chest to help us expand our membership.

First birthday and Open Day

Our second year has already begun with a flourish. Our first birthday party and Open Day on 6 October went with a swing and, in spite of the terrible weather, attracted 180 people, many of whom were meeting us for the first time. Having Clive Anderson cut our birthday cake gave extra pizzazz to a very lively event. The success of the afternoon reflected the enormous enthusiasm of so many members, and especially our brilliant group coordinators who produced enticing displays to attract more members for their groups. The event was featured in the local press and the Craft Group's tombola of delightful items made by members raised £125 for Islington Giving.

Theatre outing

Later in October, over 100 members went to see *The Vertical Hour* by David Hare at the Park theatre, Finsbury Park, our new local theatre that opened in 2013. We definitely had VIP treatment with a pre-theatre talk by Artistic Director, Jez Bond, accompanied by his lovely dog Hazel, and our own designated area in the bar where we could enjoy a glass or two of wine and get to know each other better.

Membership survey

We've certainly come a long way so far, and now have over 300 members and nearly 40 groups, so what's next?

Well, the Steering Committee decided that we would seek your views on Islington U3A and what you'd like to see in the future. Three group coordinators, not on the Steering Committee, Diane Brace, Chris Bulford and Martyn Waring, volunteered to design and run an anonymous members survey and I'd like to thank them very much for doing so.

The survey took place in the autumn. 174 members completed it, a response rate of 63%, which is very good indeed. I'd like to share some of the key findings with you now and you can also find a summary and the full results on the website.

Over 90% of respondents were very or mostly satisfied with Islington U3A. All our current activities were popular, with talks being the most popular, followed by outings, such as visits and walking, and discussion groups. The majority of people had heard about Islington U3A from a friend or another U3A, although around a third had found out about us from local papers, posters and leaflets. Over 80% use the website and a similar percentage read the newsletter. Our age range is from under 60 to over 80.

January quiz

One of the great attractions of a U3A is the opportunity to make new friends and to feel more a part of the local community and this was something that you also stressed in your comments in the survey. While the monthly meetings and the interests groups do provide opportunities for getting to know other members, social events are important too and you would like more of them. And so would the Committee, we like them too.

We are having a quiz night on 12 January and tickets are already on sale today and there is information about how to buy them on the website. Also in the New Year, we will be organising a series of coffee mornings and afternoons in different parts of the Borough so that you can get to know members who live near you.

Developing our membership across the Borough

Islington U3A members come from all parts of the Borough and beyond. However, the majority of members live to the south of the Resource Centre. As a result, most interest groups and other activities are similarly located, which makes them less easy to get to for members in the north of Islington. And this was something else that was raised in responses to the survey. The Committee shares this concern and sees it as a priority to promote membership in those parts of borough where we are currently less strong. Already, some members have volunteered to help us do this, and if you'd like to as well, please let me know.

Encouraging men to join

As I mentioned earlier, we have a grant to help us expand our membership from Islington Council's Community Chest, which will support this initiative. In giving us the grant, the Council particularly focused on our need to increase the number of men who are members. Those of you who were at the inaugural meeting may remember Gwen Wright's comment that she was pleased to see

so many men and we ventured to think that we were different from other U3A's in that respect. But sadly I have to tell you that the membership survey indicates that we are not. Only about a fifth of our members are men. As we all know, men can sometimes be more reluctant in retirement to get out and join in, but enjoy and benefit enormously from doing so. So in our membership campaigns for the coming year, we will be looking for ways to redress our gender imbalance and welcome any ideas you have to make this happen.

Accessibility

One of the challenges for running a U3A in Islington is the difficulty of finding meeting venues that we can afford and that are accessible to members. Although we live in a geographically compact borough, it can be surprisingly difficult to get from one part to another. We have chosen to meet here for the monthly meetings because it is relatively central, it has wheelchair access and an induction loop and we can afford it. As with all U3As, most interest groups meet in members' houses; which in Islington often means there are lots of stairs. This generally works well but if it is a barrier to participation, we will do all we can to help find an alternative venue for that particular group.

A membership organisation

One question that has come up a number of times is whether non-members can come to our meetings and we have always said no. There are two reasons why this is so. We all pay to be members of Islington U3A and to enjoy the benefits of membership and it is not fair to members if our meetings are open to non-members. Also, as members we have the benefit of the Third Age Trust's very unusual public liability insurance policy that protects every member in the event of a claim against them by another member or a member of the public. Except in some very limited circumstances, this policy is made void if non-members attend our meetings. So that is why we've had to say no on several occasions.

Achieving our aspiration

We come together in Islington U3A to share our knowledge and experience and to learn from each other and we are all ambitious to do more in the future. For example, in the survey, you identified around 70 different interest groups you would like Islington U3A to run. Also, while the website and newsletter are very much appreciated, there is a desire for more frequent communication about what is happening.

As an organisation that is run by and for its members, we are the only people who can make our aims a reality. We need more coordinators if we are to set up new groups and the Committee can only expand its work if it has more help. Already around 50 members are actively involved in running Islington U3A, which is fantastic. With more we can do more. So if you have some time to spare, do think of getting more involved and contact me or someone else on

the Committee to talk about what you'd like to do. All our contact details are on the contact page on the website.

To conclude, I would like to thank you all for your support. Without members we wouldn't have an Islington U3A. On your behalf, I'd like to thank all the coordinators for their sterling work in running such excellent interest groups, other members who have helped with specific areas such as the initial design of the website, creating the posters for our public meetings and helping out at events and of course, the hardworking and talented members of the Steering Committee who make such an enormous contribution to our very special U3A.

Anne Weyman, Chair

November 2014