



Chair's Report to 2017 AGM

As you know, today is my last day as Chair of Islington U3A and rather than just talk about the past year, I am going to go back to the beginning and how we got to here.

Getting Started

It is now almost five years since my dear friend Leila Lessof invited me to join the Islington based book group she had just set up within North London U3A. I was delighted to join. There were only six of us to begin with. A major topic of discussion was unhappiness about being part of North London U3A which seemed so remote, and that we really needed an Islington U3A. We all agreed that something should be done. So we contacted U3A National Office and found out that the first step was to organise a meeting to test for local interest

Leila booked the room, Louise Matlock designed a poster, I emailed everybody I knew and every local organisation we could think of and in May 2013 we had the Launch Meeting. We were modest in our expectations – the room's capacity was 35 people. It was soon full and more and more and more chairs had to be brought in to seat the 50 plus people who came.

Steering Committee

From those 50, 15 volunteered to be part of the Steering Committee and we set about creating Islington U3A. Over the summer we analysed the information from the Launch about who was willing to coordinate an interest group and which groups would be of interest to members. As a result we were able to offer 28 groups at the Inaugural meeting in October 2013 and by then we had also organised a monthly meeting programme through to Easter 2014.

Inaugural meeting

I had thought that we might attract about 100 members in our first year and was nervous about how many people would come to the Inaugural meeting. The long queue of people waiting to register which stretched into Holloway Road showed I needn't have worried. Very soon we had nearly 250 members and it became apparent that the venue for our first monthly meeting in November was not going to be big enough. There was very little time to find a new location which we could afford, and we ended up in the 900 seater Union Chapel.

First monthly meeting

The Union Chapel in November is not the warmest place to be. Most of the 123 people who came were wearing their coats during the meeting. As I was on the stage with David Aaronovitch our speaker, I didn't think it appropriate to wear mine and it really was rather chilly. Fortunately, David didn't seem to mind at all. He was ebullient, witty and incisive.

Extending our scope

During 2013/14 we began to extend our activities beyond monthly meetings and interest groups and had our first summer party, which was so successful that it immediately became an Islington U3A tradition.

We also looked outwards to the broader community, establishing links with local community organisations. Some members walked the Borough boundary to raise funds for Islington Giving, the Islington charity that supports projects to reduce poverty and isolation in Islington. We raised £250. Each year since then we have increased the amounts we've raised, and this year, with more events and many more members participating, the total was £2,230.

By the end of 2013 we had 300 members and 35 interest groups and our monthly meeting programme was already famous for the outstanding quality and range of our speakers.

Our first birthday party and open day

We began our second year with our Ist Birthday Party and Open Day. Clive Anderson cut the cake and there were 180 people there to eat it. All the groups displayed their activities, visitors were able to join and everybody milled around enjoying meeting up with old

friends and new. Our Birthday Party and Open Day have continued to be a major highlight of our year, when we attract new members and celebrate all the wonderful things we do.

Members' views

As we approached our first AGM in November, we undertook a survey of members' views and found that generally members were very satisfied with iU3A. There was though a clear desire for more opportunities to get to know each other better. In response we decided to brighten up the dark January days with our first pub quiz which again was so popular that it became an annual event. And we also introduced the monthly coffee mornings in locations around the Borough so that members can meet other members who live nearby.

More development

In October 2014 we made our first iU3A group visit to the Park Theatre in Finsbury Park. For these visits members can bring a guest who isn't a member and more than 100 people came to see David Hare's play *The Vertical Hour*. We have repeated this outing each year since and this year we had the most wonderfully hilarious evening watching Joe Orton's play *Loot*.

By September 2015 we had 400 members and 45 groups.

Our third year

In most U3As only about 20% of members are men and in Islington U3A the percentage has never been above 23%. Sometimes it's assumed that this is because women live longer than men so there are fewer men in our age group. But this difference is only marked in the 80+ age group and doesn't in any way explain the U3A membership structure. The range of topics covered by our interest groups and monthly meetings is very broad and yet the imbalance persists. Last year we consulted men members about what more we could do and some new groups were established as well as the Pub Lunches which we now have monthly. Of course women enjoy a pub lunch too but hopefully they will also encourage more men to join us.

Other innovations in 2015/16 were the Clues trail during Islington Giving week and the computer help sessions both of which have been repeated this year.

By the time we reached our 3rd Birthday, we had 500 members and 50 groups. We again celebrated with a Party and Open Day, this time with our cake being cut by actor and Islington resident Barbara Flynn.

Streamlining our systems

Having grown so much, we realised we needed a membership system that was designed for an organisation like ours. In 2016 we decided to use the Beacon system which was developed by a national group of U3A members, and so is tailored to our needs and we have been gradually introducing it over the last year. Its adoption has already brought huge benefits at all levels within our organisation.

- People wanting to join can do so on line.
- We can renew our membership on line and 164 of us did so this year.
- We can also use Beacon to join groups and increasingly to find information about their activities.
- Coordinators, particularly of groups with a large membership, can communicate much more quickly and easily with their group's members.
- And above all the workloads for Isabel as Membership Secretary and Sue as Groups' Coordinator have reduced drastically, which is a great plus.

And there are still more gains to come as implementation continues.

A friendly organisation

In February we did our second survey of members' views. Again there was a very high level of satisfaction. Many people who responded thought Islington U3A was very welcoming but others did not.

As our organisation has become established and we build our friendships, we need to make sure that new members feel included too. So while we have always had a welcome team at our Open Days and in 2015 we introduced new members teas, we need to do more. Now at monthly meetings new members are greeted by existing members who ensure that they are warmly welcomed. Clearly though we must make sure this is the case at all our activities.

Another important finding from the survey was that the majority of people think we should continue to support Islington Giving.

Effective communications

We were pleased to find that the twice monthly Bulletin and the Newsletter are widely read. The website is also much used by members. In addition it is, of course, our public face. Back in 2013, we decided that the clunky, blue and yellow website template that U3A's national office offered would not reflect the lively and vibrant character of an Islington U3A. Instead our website has its own distinctive colours, lots of photos to represent all aspects of Islington and our very own Islington U3A logo. And it is easy to read and to navigate and is still much admired.

We ended 2016/17 with nearly 600 members and 57 groups.

The U3A family

There are over 1000 U3A's in the UK with 400,000 plus members and we all operate under the umbrella of the national Third Age Trust which provides us with advice and educational support and the opportunity to meet up with representatives of other U3As nationally, in the London Region and through an informal network of U3A chairs in this part of London.

Surprisingly London has fewer U3As in relation to its population than other regions. This year though, we have seen two new U3A's in North London, one in Hampstead Garden suburb and our near neighbour Crouch End and District U3A, which had its inaugural meeting in September. Both have already attracted a substantial number of members. I am delighted that the benefits that we enjoy are now available to their members and that we have already collaborated with Crouch End to set up a joint interest group, the first that we have had.

All U3As are different and reflect the character of their local area. I say to potential speakers that our members are well informed, knowledgeable and inquiring. Speakers often comment on the excellent questions you put to them. One speaker who was asked some very challenging questions said how much he had enjoyed the meeting and that, when he had spoken to another U3A, he hadn't been asked any questions at all. Could you ever imagine that happening here?

A community of sharing, learning and friendship

Many, many people have contributed to making our U3A so successful – our brilliant committee members, our wonderful

group coordinators, our supportive members who help at events and in other ways, and participate enthusiastically in monthly meetings and our interest groups.

For me, Islington U3A is a community of sharing, learning and friendship. We have each made our contribution to making this so and building a truly great organisation. It has been the most enjoyable and rewarding experience to collaborate with you all and to make so many good friends and I would like to thank all of you for your tremendous support and for being so very, very special.

Anne Weyman
Chair May 2013 – November 2017