

Fleet and District U3A

Chair's report for 2020 AGM

Good morning, thank you for attending our first virtual AGM. This is the opportunity for your committee to tell you what we have been doing in your interests over the last year. And what a year it has been!

We began in late November 2019 expecting our usual successful year of events, group meetings, visits, fun and friendship but as we all know that was not to be.

As soon as lockdown was announced in March your committee decided that we must contact every member of our U3A to ensure they were safe and well supported in the new circumstances. Most members were contacted by email but we had well over a hundred members without an email address known to us. Each member of the committee took a share of the list and we telephoned everyone. We were able to identify some isolated members who were quite alarmed by the new rules. We put them in touch with local volunteer organisations who set up food and medicine deliveries for them. We did receive feedback from Hart Voluntary Action that at least one member felt very well supported by our U3A.

As soon as we realised that there were several lonely members who would benefit from a regular phone call, we set up a telephone buddy system and were overwhelmed with volunteers who made sure all was well with the recipient and maintained regular contact until it was not needed any more. At about the same time, in April, Alan Jones, our Secretary, set up a Fleet U3A Facebook page to give another avenue of communication to our members. It became very popular and attracted regular posts from several of our more outgoing members including a very entertaining series from a member and his imaginary dog!

Also, in April, Sandy Redman, our Newsletter editor, set up an extra newsletter called 'Between Times', to give more space for articles and information and this proved very popular. It had a more light-hearted flavour than our usual monthly newsletter and several members sent in stories, jokes, recipes and puzzles to keep us busy at a very worrying time for us all.

From the beginning of lockdown your committee realised we would be even busier than usual and would need to meet regardless of the 'not meeting in person' rules governing us all. Like many others we discovered Zoom! Consequently, we continued to meet at least once a month even in those months where we would normally take a break from our U3A responsibilities. We have quickly become used to meeting in this way and manage to have detailed discussions and make decisions as trustees in the same way as before. At the beginning of March, I wasn't sure what Zoom was and now I can happily use it for all sorts of meetings and groups. I am even using it to teach my Introduction to Bridge group, a challenge indeed without cards or bridge tables!

In fact, all of our Group Leaders (GLs) have risen to the challenge since March and have found many innovative ways to keep in touch with you all. Many have mastered Zoom and are meeting regularly much as before; some have managed to meet safely in person in the open air; emails and telephone calls have kept many groups together while Facebook and WhatsApp have been the choice of others. Whatever your GL has selected we are impressed and very appreciative of all their efforts to keep Fleet U3A running smoothly so that we are ready to pick up as before whenever we can. Stephen Grosvenor, our Groups Liaison Secretary, surveyed the GLs of our 121 groups and 100 GLs responded. Of those 79 are meeting in some way during the pandemic; 37 groups are meeting via Zoom, 36 are using other internet-based ways and the telephone to keep in touch and six groups have managed to keep meeting in person, mostly outside and always obeying the latest government Covid-19 rules. Please check our website to see the list of active groups and whether they are currently welcoming new members.

Stephen Grosvenor has worked hard to inform and advise GLs as Government rules and advice from the Third Age Trust (TAT) have been updated throughout the year. He chaired a very successful GLs' meeting via Zoom where we had nearly 80 attendees out of 101 GLs. The most we have ever had at any 'in person' GLs' meeting. Arising from this meeting he organised some in-house Zoom training for GLs and the increase in its use has made the effort very worthwhile. Many groups are able to use the Zoom licences that Fleet U3A has purchased, some are making good use of the perfectly adequate free version and several more have purchased their own licences and are very generously using them to keep their groups running smoothly. At the time of writing it seems very unlikely that 'real life' group meetings will start again before next spring at the earliest. I know we are all very grateful for everything that GLs and members are doing to keep learning and laughing going in our U3A.

One group that has been particularly affected by all the rules and regulations this year has been the visits team. Carole Matthews, the team leader, has worked tirelessly to cancel trips where possible, rearrange where that was the only option and successfully negotiate refunds where she could. I know she will join me in thanking all those who had booked a trip for their patience in waiting for decisions to be made in an ever-changing world. One trip that did go ahead was to Torquay and the safety procedures, risk assessments and general enjoyment of the trip in spite of the difficulties are entirely due to Carole's hard work and determination.

Several GLs have retired from their roles this year and although I have written a thank you note to them all I would like to take this opportunity to thank them again for all their dedication to running their groups and to making sure their members had a chance to learn something new while having fun. Of course, this means that several new GLs have taken up the mantle this year and we wish them well in leading their groups in new directions. If you are interested in setting up a new group please rest assured that there is lots of help on hand to ensure your success. Just let Stephen know.

Your committee has met in full every month throughout 2020 and have had several working group meetings in addition. I know you will join me in thanking them for trying their best to function effectively while keeping up to date with the ever changing COVID-19 landscape.

The committee is currently at full strength which I take as a testament to Fleet U3A's determination to continue to grow in spite of all the difficulties we are facing. We have 12 members ready for election today and two co-opted members, 14 members in total. Two committee volunteers joined us during the year. We welcome, Adrian Van Klaveren who has taken up the new post of Publicity Secretary and Andy Kirk who has taken over as Programme Secretary and the new role of Covid-19 advisor.

Adrian writes, that he joined the committee in the summer to take on the new role of Publicity Secretary. There are two main elements to the job. Firstly, to make sure as many people as possible in the area – members and non-members - know what Fleet U3A is doing. Secondly to attract new members so that our U3A can continue to thrive. Due to the impact of Covid -19, we are having to think afresh about how to do this. Posters, leaflets and articles in local free magazines have been a start in making people aware that Fleet U3A is still running and worth joining. Activity levels on Facebook are increasing which is important as it is a shop window for people thinking about joining us.

But we need to do much more. At a time when most face-to-face meetings are not happening, many of the old ways of recruiting members no longer work. Fortunately, our U3A is one of the pathfinder groups for the Third Age Trust's national recruitment campaign. By the end of this year we will have a new publicity plan designed to help us recruit more new members, welcome them effectively and make them want to stay. Obviously, any publicity plan is only effective if what's on offer is something people want – we have to be able to make clear what you miss if you are not a member. So, the challenge for us all is to develop new activities including online groups and virtual meetings so that we can offer something current that potential members will value even with the continuing restrictions. The more fresh ideas we have to tell people about, the greater the chances of success for our publicity campaign in the New Year. Please contact Adrian if you have suggestions or want to help with the campaign.

Barbara Jones, our Venues Secretary, has had a busy year maintaining her excellent relationships with our venues despite all the challenges. She is ably assisted by Anna White. It is down to Barbara's diplomacy that venue managers continue to be understanding of Fleet U3A's position due to the pandemic. Barbara is also our Minutes Secretary and performs this onerous task with great efficiency and a smile at all times.

Our Treasurer, Neil Morley, says that his main jobs this year have been to pay refunds to members when our planned visits were cancelled and negotiating, mostly successfully, with venues for refunds after the first lockdown prevented us from fulfilling our contracts with them. As well as his usual job of ensuring we spend your money wisely.

The committee decided to go ahead with our usual membership renewal round in early summer. Our reserve funds had reduced somewhat because of the unexpected expenses to do with the first lockdown and we, as trustees of Fleet U3A, were concerned that our reserve might fall below the recommended safe level if we didn't collect your £14 annual fee as usual. The Third Age Trust advised all U3As to expect a 25% to 30% fall in membership because people were unable to meet in their usual groups in person. Fiona Godfrey, our Membership Secretary, managed the whole process of renewal on her own as the Membership Team were unable to meet in person to stuff envelopes and post programmes.

We are very appreciative of her efforts and in awe of her dedication and efficiency. If our membership had increased at the usual rate, we had hoped to welcome our 2000th member during this year but that was not to be. However, Fiona was pleased to report that our membership has stayed very loyal to Fleet U3A and our total for the current academic year has only fallen by 15%. We currently have 1,669 members. For comparison, we had 1,903 at the same time last year and 1,963 by May 2019. We did continue with our new Member Coffee mornings via Zoom and had an impressive turnout considering they had to bring their own coffee!

It is always a pleasure for the committee to consider offering life membership of our U3A to a member who has gone above and beyond to support our development. This year the trustees took pleasure in awarding the honour to Mike Kennet-Brown who served on the committee for over seven years, latterly as Events Secretary and did so much to develop the programme of events as it is in normal times and to ensure members' participation and enjoyment in all of the different activities in our U3A and for other U3As in the area.

Carol Howlett, our new Events Secretary, regrets that she has not been able to oversee our usual programme of activities but she has volunteered to be a vice-chair of Fleet U3A and looks forward to a busier year when COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

Jenny Teagle, our Outreach Secretary reports that it has been a challenging year beginning with the very successful trip to Winchester Christmas Market on an unexpected double decker bus, not the accessible coach the group were expecting! Strollers went from strength to strength. Regular strolls around Elvetham Heath, followed by the compulsory coffee and chat, were enjoyed by a growing number of members. Unfortunately, with many in the vulnerable group for COVID -19, the strolls had to be curtailed. Jenny has been invited to join the Inclusion and Diversity group set up by the Third Age Trust and is actively working to improve access across the U3A movement.

Alan Jones, our Secretary and Beacon lead has been very busy this year. He set up and managed the Fleet U3A Facebook Members' Group, which now has 228 members. The Facebook page was very recently handed over to Adrian as part of the publicity plan. Alan manages the complicated scheduling of the two Fleet U3A Zoom Licences to enable groups to continue during the pandemic, 15 Groups now use the licences. He administers the Beacon Membership and Financial management system, which was especially busy during the renewal period with many queries from members. He designed Beacon training to encourage GLs to use the system to manage their groups as it is GDPR compliant and negates the need for GLs to keep members' personal details on file anywhere else. He is expert at keeping us on track by liaising with the Third Age Trust particularly on insurance and Copyright licences, updating paid-tutor contracts and insurance, preparing for this AGM and generally keeping all trustees up to date with our duties and responsibilities. Alan is also on the advisory team for the new version of Beacon that the Third Age Trust are developing and hoping to roll out next year.

Chris Porter is our Webmaster and wants you to know that our website provides comprehensive information on all of our activities for members and the public alike. During the Covid-19 closure he has added a section where news and official announcements can be

found together with links to the Government and Third Age Trust guidance on rule changes and also to the Third Age Trust's advice and newsletters. Also included on this page is guidance from the Police on recognising and avoiding the many scams that have emerged trying to take advantage of vulnerable people, also there are pointers on where to obtain local support and help during this difficult time. In addition, there are links and suggestions for numerous things to do whilst your groups are not meeting, such as on-line theatre performances and virtual city or art gallery tours.

Chris would like to include more input from members on any relevant topic, such as how your group has been continuing to meet during lockdown or telling other members how you coped this year. Maybe you could share your gardening or DIY successes or disasters. Have you started learning something new, discovered new local walks, made new friends? Are there any local sources of help you can share? What about your experiences using Zoom? Please send Chris, our webmaster, your stories, photos and any humorous memes you have so they can be shared on the website.

Jan Glasscock is our Enquiries Secretary and as such the 'first impression' of our U3A. She says that she is not only the point of contact for potential members but also for established members who just need that extra piece of information. With Fleet being such an active U3A it is not possible to have all the answers to hand, but everyone can be assured of a very warm welcome from her and she says she enjoys making every effort to find someone who has the answer to every query, as soon as she can.

Last but not least, John Gawthorpe is our Monthly Meetings Secretary and he reports that 2020 began with two very popular talks, each of which was heard by a capacity audience at the Harlington. Veteran broadcaster Alan Grace brought pictures, films and artefacts to help tell the story of Berlin from 1931 to 1989. He disarmingly confessed to the broadcaster's ability to speak for hours, but we hung on his every word.

The next speaker was Colin Gray MBE of Fleet Pond Society. Perhaps his top tip was that bog myrtle is a good mosquito deterrent.

Then came March, when Richard Wigram was due to lead us 'In Search of Elgar'. As we know, that search never began. And the rest of the year's programme stalled too.

Thanks to the ingenuity, enthusiasm and technical skill of Fleet U3A members, we have been able to provide some virtual meetings using YouTube and Zoom. Nothing can replace the pleasure of meeting friends and fellow members over coffee at the Harlington, but the entertainment value of these talks has been very high. Thanks to Maurice Kent, we now know how the 'ice house' scene in Dr Zhivago was filmed... and faked and an hour spent in the company of jazz saxophonist and raconteur Alan Barnes was full of unexpected delights. John says that there will be an extra YouTube talk this year, in December. Details coming soon.

Heading to 2021, he says that we have at least four more virtual meetings in the pipeline. January's talk will be on Gilbert and Sullivan, as in the programme. Future talks promise to include other speakers from the 2020 and 2021 calendars.

John Gawthorpe has also volunteered to be a vice-chair of Fleet U3A so having had no vice-chair since becoming chairperson I now have a surfeit of riches in having two!

I have the privilege of leading this hard-working team and supporting them in all that they do to make our U3A the best it can be. I feel very humble that the committee have asked me to stay on for another year as chairperson but I do realise the sense of keeping things as they are on the committee in these ever-changing times.

As you will have realised already, we are an outward looking committee. In my view, this adds a richness to all that we do. As well as my role within Fleet U3A, I also chair a local network of about 20 U3As. As a consequence of this, I am invited by the Third Age Trust to attend South East Regional events and meetings and national network link meetings. Our U3A gains a great deal from the exchange of ideas and up to date information that we all glean from our activities beyond Fleet and district.

I will finish by thanking you all for your attendance today at this first ever virtual AGM for our U3A. I trust you have found it a worthwhile experience and I encourage you to play an even greater part than you already do in taking our U3A into the future, post Covid -19. We will need to rethink many of the practices we have become familiar with in the past. We must embrace new technology and become used to a mixed real and virtual world to safeguard some members who may choose to remain at home for some time to come. We need you to think up innovative ideas and we need your enthusiasm to make them happen so that Fleet U3A can continue to offer our community the amazing array of activities to which we, as current members, have become accustomed.

“Tough times never last, but tough people do.” – Robert H. Schuller

Keep safe and well,

Paddy Powell
Chair, Fleet and District U3A