

## NLU3A CHAIR'S REPORT TO 2023 AGM

2022/23 has been the first full year of the new normal after the pandemic. How has it differed from the old normal? Our membership appears to have stabilised at around the 500 mark, compared with 700 a few years ago. We have put an increasing effort into publicity to attract new members, which has increased our membership. This year, thanks to Michael Lewin, Marion Fitzpatrick and others, we exhibited at a stall at the East Finchley Festival and elsewhere, revived our annual open morning for non-members, and have had articles published in *The Archer*, with hopefully other local events to follow.

There are still about 70 interest groups offering a fascinatingly wide range of topics – including history, languages, discussion, practical skills, walks and much more. One long-term legacy of Covid-19 is that we now have a number of groups which find meeting online the best solution, particularly for members with mobility problems, providing another option for meetings beside members' homes, paid-for venues – and of course, for walking groups, the great outdoors. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the group co-ordinators who keep these groups active and vibrant – their names are unfortunately too many to mention individually. But I must mention Henrietta Cohen and her team of Candice Waldram and Ruth Newman (now succeeded by Mary O'Toole), who support the co-ordinators and keep the group system going.

This year, we have made a successful switch to a new location for monthly meetings at St Margaret's United Reform Church in Finchley, and attendance has been steadily growing – and now reaches nearly 100 members on occasion. I am very grateful to Edmond Cohen for keeping on with the organisation and chairing of these meetings, and to everyone who helps with technical support and with greeting members.

We have also restarted our programme of Awayday and Further Awayday visits, including trips to Polesden Lacy, St Pancras Old Church and Gunnersbury Park. In May, we relaunched our Summer Programme with a wide range of well-attended one-off events. Thanks to Frank Kelsall and Pam Lewis for organising Awaydays, Melvyn Rees for Further Awaydays and Laurence Hanison and Kathy Kyriakides for the Summer Programme.

We were not able to hold a festive lunch last winter, though we hope to resume this year; however, nearly 50 members enjoyed a Summer Tea at the Muswell Hill Methodist Church. Thanks to Marion Fitzpatrick for organising this, also to Elsa Ramsey and the rest of the catering team and to all those who helped with preparation and clearing up.

All this requires co-ordination by the committee, and there are a number of administrative functions which any charity needs to operate to keep on the right side of the law. Roy Seger keeps our finances in order and Ruth Silver has been doing a phenomenal number of tasks which only a few years ago were done by three people – keeping membership records up to date, taking minutes at our committee meetings and watching for compliance with national rules and regulations.

We have kept members informed of all that is going on by an active programme of communication. Our website, overseen by Susan Watt, assisted on the technical side by Mike Christie, provides a bank of information about what we offer with regular updates – you can see the latest news on the home page. I myself edit the monthly email newsletter to tell members the latest developments. And Leni Green and her team have masterfully kept our lively and colourful members' magazine going, with a wide variety of intriguing articles.

The other important thing the committee has to do, is to keep its eye on the strategic direction of NLU3A. The last time a comprehensive review was made was in 2018, so we thought as we came out from Covid-19 it was the right time to review it again. The committee analysed trends in membership and activities, looked at what neighbouring u3as were doing and reviewed developments in the outside world. We invited comments from members and had a very useful working tea with group co-ordinators, who shared their group members' thoughts with us. This generated a large number of suggestions, some of which we are taking forward, others of which we have had to place in a nice to-do box until we can find volunteers to work them up in practice.

Overall, we came to the conclusion that there were three priorities which needed to guide future actions:

Attract and maintain more new members, particularly younger ones.

Refresh the activities we offer, especially one-off and social events.

Encourage more members to get involved in running the organisation.

Attracting new members means stepping up our publicity efforts yet further, improving the way we welcome new members and keeping our subscriptions competitive with neighbouring u3as. We already hold welcome meetings for new members, but we want to enhance these and supplement them with an individual service to guide new members to activities they might be interested in. I am grateful to Aliya Middleton and Christine Barnard who have joined a new Welcome Team to do this.

On subscriptions, we have to be aware that ours are at the top of the range locally, and while we cannot afford to get too far out of line, our subscriptions have to cover our costs. By far the biggest single element of our costs is hiring premises for groups, so we have had to introduce rules which limit payments to venues where the cost per group member per year exceeds £40. This will only affect a few groups, though we realise it will involve some unwelcome changes – either finding new members, moving to cheaper premises or reducing the frequency of meetings. Alternatively, group members could make a small contribution to costs. We expect that discussion groups and, certainly, groups with fewer than 10 members, will meet in members' homes or free venues.

We will also look at reducing other costs. For example, for the 2024 renewals, we will move from issuing physical membership cards to electronic proof of membership, to save on postage.

Refreshing the activities we offer will be an ongoing project. The summer programme enabled us to test out the demand for one-off and social events. There is clearly an appetite for quizzes and we hope to build on that. We would also like to start a programme of evening social activities, and we are especially looking for people who would be interested in organising some of these – for example, a group visit to a local restaurant, or to a cinema or theatre. And do remember, if you think we should try out an activity, do let Henrietta know and she can gauge the interest of others, including looking for other enthusiasts to start it off on a team basis.

I almost hesitate before elaborating on the third priority, getting more members involved in running the organisation. A count showed that around 30% of members already volunteered or offered to volunteer to help. This is a wonderful level of commitment and thank you all so much. Unfortunately, however, the turnover of individuals and the appetite for new activities means we have an almost insatiable need for new active helpers.

In particular, we will need to refresh the committee in the not-so-distant future as existing members come to the end of their prescribed terms. I understand it can look quite a commitment, although it can also be enjoyable nurturing an organisation alongside like-minded colleagues. In order to make it easier to take on committee posts, we want to build up teams of people to help with committee roles, like the new Welcome Team or Henrietta's Group Organiser Team.

I have certainly found my first year as Chair enjoyable and the support I have had from fellow committee members and others has been tremendous. We have come through the pandemic in strength and have a flourishing future ahead of us. Next summer will see the 30th anniversary of the foundation of NLU3A. Long may it continue to enrich the learning and social lives of older people in the area.