

Maidenhead U3A AGM, 14th February 2017

Chairman's Report

Established in the Autumn of 1998, Maidenhead U3A is entering its 19th year and now has a healthy membership of 624. In 2016 we gained 106 new members and there were 54 members who did not renew.

Our U3A committee and convenors go to reasonable lengths to welcome new members by holding two meetings a year so that they can learn more about our groups and events. Coffee Mornings, reintroduced in April, provide an informal opportunity for members to meet. Additionally, we call new members to wish them a warm welcome, help them get started and answer any questions.

We now have more than 65 Interest Groups comprising academic, cultural, technical, physical, recreational and social activities or a combination of these. We actively support and encourage the formation of new groups about which Ian will say more. The majority of Groups meet in Convenors' or members' homes at the kindness of individuals. This clearly keeps our costs down but presents a challenge when the popularity of the group grows and numbers increase. We continue to benefit from the generosity of the Shire Horse Public House who willingly provide tables for our Cribbage, Rummikub and Quiz groups. Other venues include SportsAble, St. Joseph's, Cox Green Community Centre and West London Aero Club. The Committee have investigated additional locations and we are now able to offer some alternative venues to existing and to new Groups. Provision has been made in our budget to provide subsidies, if required.

As a Committee we frequently consider how best to serve Maidenhead U3A members. With groups competently managed by dedicated convenors, what is the role of the committee? As you leave your latest gathering, content and knowing when the next meeting is, why do you need a Committee to help you on your way? Well, clearly someone has to organise the Christmas party, Convenors' party, monthly speakers and New Members Meetings. There are also finances, the monthly Newsletter, publicity, subscriptions and Third Age Trust matters to take care of.

Every quarter at least two members of the Committee attend a Thames Valley Network Representatives' Meeting at Benson. Although much of the discussion is around policy and practices, we do get to hear about interesting events which we communicate to relevant groups. In 2016 these included the Shared Learning Project at Holloway College and a number of Study Days on the English Civil War, Railways and Robotics. Both John Twydale and I attended the Robotics day at Oxford Brooks; it was an enjoyable and thought provoking event. I urge you all to look out for these Study Days when they are announced. But be aware... a few of the U3As in our network are on the ball and snap up places quickly. More will be said about how we keep you informed of these events.

We have been publishing our new format Newsletter for just over a year and I think I can say it has been well received, based on feedback. We have considered alternative options such as a quarterly publication in booklet form, like other U3As. This could contain longer articles, features and photographs which I know many of you would like. This will require a larger editorial team to work alongside Carol. Comments, suggestions and offers of help are welcome.

December's Christmas party was again well received. Each year we try and do something different. For 2017 we are hoping to organise live music with a small band.

Technology, by which I mean Information Technology. We love it and we hate it. How we despair when we see 'Updates being installed, please wait' or 'Can't find printer' even though you can see it sitting in the corner of the room; these torments always seem to happen when we're in a hurry to leave the house. Nevertheless, we persevere and with 87% of our members owning an email address we must embrace the future. At its best, IT is a time saver and provides an efficient means for disseminating information.

Last year the Committee benefited from the adoption of a membership management system named Beacon. Developed by a team of U3A individuals, it allows us to store members' details securely without having to email spreadsheets between committee members. We use its email capabilities to send out the Monthly Newsletter, contact Convenors, invite recent joiners to new members' meetings, send reminders to members to pay their subscriptions, and more. Beacon is now used by 103 U3As up and down the country, from West Arun to West Dartmoor. Many of you will have noticed the barcode on our badges, printed by Beacon. We are planning to introduce a barcode reader to scan badges at Monthly Meetings to replace the laborious signing in process. Don't fear, if you've forgotten your badge you will still be allowed in, but of course wearing your badge with your name prominently displayed, makes it easier for us all to get to know each other.

This month we are also planning to introduce a new website. After almost 3 years of discussions, looking at different technologies, speaking to other U3As and conducting a thorough review of other U3A websites the Committee agreed to go ahead with a solution last November. I make no secret that we have cherry picked ideas from other U3A websites. Not only have we caught up with some of the better sites we also have a platform which will allow us to stay ahead. Soon, members will be able to set-up subscription preferences enabling them to receive early notification of events like our outings, theatre trips and TVN Study Days. Those of you with Smartphones will also be able to synchronise your calendars with group and outings diaries. We must also remember that an important group of website users are not in the room today nor are they on our membership database, they are the many visitors who, Google "Maidenhead U3A" in the search for new opportunities. We want them to find a vibrant, welcoming U3A whose members pursue a diverse set of interests that they will want to join. They might even be inspired to join and start additional groups.

Although most members are reachable by email, we mustn't exclude the 82 members who do not have an email address. Although we can reach these members by post, as we do with the Monthly Newsletter, this is not effective if we wish to notify them of opportunities that have come up at short-notice. A possible idea is to link them to an email enabled family member, friend or another U3A member who can pass on information.

Of course, Maidenhead U3A, like other U3As, could not function if it were not for the dedication and passion of our Convenors some of whom lead multiple groups and who also serve on the Committee. We should also give a mention to others in the background with a special thanks to Pam Teasdale who faithfully provides support at the Monthly Meetings, Convenors' Party and Christmas Party.

Earlier, I mentioned our new membership management system and website. These replace a set of solutions, which served us for many years, and which were developed and maintained by Stephen Waites. May I express my thanks to Stephen for all his hard work in the past.

Returning to the committee. We welcome two new members, John Twytle our proposed Treasurer and Cynthia Wood our proposed Events secretary. We must also wish send our wishes to Hilary Warren who has had to step down in order to care for a sick friend in Spain.

Finally, as many of you may know, committee members are limited to a maximum term of 4 years. So, this year we must say goodbye to Hilary Brodie and Bill Teasdale. In this time, Hilary has been Secretary for 2 years and Chairman for 2 years; Bill has served as Speaker Organiser for one year and as Treasurer for 3 years. Speaking for the rest of the committee I would like to thank both Hilary and Bill for their commitment, for the knowledge they have passed on and for keeping us all on track. So, can I ask you all to give both Bill and Hilary a warm thank you.