

## **Supporting People to Remain Active through Transitions - Most Active County January 2018.**

### *University of the Third Age - Learn, Laugh and Live*

I hope you were attracted by the strap line - LL&L that's exactly what we do. Although the name university implies several things - degrees and hard study - it's really the university of life which is meaningful to us. We continue to have a thirst for learning, but want to enjoy it too, hence the "Laugh" on the strap line, and the LIVE is about why we are all here today - we want to enhance the way we live.

I will start at the very beginning -

Founded over 35 years ago, the UK U3A movement (based loosely on the French model) aims to encourage groups of people in their third age to come together and continue their enjoyment of learning in subjects of interest to them.

The 'third age' is defined by a time in your life (not necessarily chronological) where you have the opportunity to undertake learning for its own sake. There is no minimum age, but a focus on people who are no longer in full-time employment or raising a family, so could be in part-time work, caring, studying or of independent means.

Our founders envisaged a collaborative approach with peers learning from each other. The U3A movement was to be self-funded, with members not working towards qualifications but learning purely for pleasure. There would be no distinction between the learners and the teachers – everyone could take a turn at being both if they wished.

From its beginnings in 1981, the movement grew very quickly and by the early 1990s, a U3A was opening every fortnight. U3As grew in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and in

2008 membership was increasing by 11% every year. 2010 saw our membership hitting the quarter million mark.

In 2016 the U3A movement reached the milestone of 1,000 U3As celebrated by a conference with speakers including Eric Midwinter – one of the founders of the British U3A movement.

Today, our movement includes over 400,000 U3A members in more than 1,010 U3As and is continuing to grow every day.

### **What about the local picture?**

There are 12 u3as in Suffolk, all based in or near towns, joined by 2 Norfolk border u3as to form our Suffolk and District Network. Network development came about as a response to the growing need for better communication and sharing of ideas / problems. We have over 7000 members in our Network.

Our largest U3A by far is East Suffolk, with over 2000 members, which is almost its own Network. With Ipswich as its major site, there are 3 other towns, Felixstowe, Saxmundham and Woodbridge which provide membership services under the main Executive committee.

Our newest u3a is Beccles, which only started 3 years ago and has rapidly expanded to its current 600+ members

All costs for members are kept low - as a charity we do not make a profit - annual fees from £12 to £20.

**Focussing on Sudbury u3a**, my own u3a, membership has tripled in the 11 years since I joined. We now have upward of 750 members and 68 interest groups.

Memberships fees are kept low, currently only £12 a year - it's been that for about 10 years now. Our increasing membership has meant we do not need to increase the fee as our fixed costs are low.

Learning in our u3a, as most others, starts with monthly central lecture meetings on a variety of subjects, delivered by a specialist lecturer. This is also the place where all the business is done! Then the main focus of learning is through interest groups, led by a member, whose job is to maintain the diary and ensure the group runs as its members want. Many groups meet in members homes but larger groups use meeting halls / churches / even pubs! Our groups are self funding in that they share the costs of say room hire, coffee, photocopying, but a couple of £s is usually maximum.

I am the Groups Co-ordinator whose role is to help develop new groups in response to members ideas / requests - they don't just happen! For example, when a couple of years ago I was being hassled because the table tennis group was full and no-one was able to join - I set about starting up another group, which had to be in the same venue to be able to use the 4 tables we own. Two years on and once more we have demand exceeding supply so I am starting to look for a Group 3! We only pay £1 a week to play.

Another example is Spanish Beginners - we had several members who wanted to learn, but no-one felt they could lead such a group as they didn't have fluent Spanish - so following the u3a principles, we started up a group, chose a beginners' programme to follow, one member volunteered to be leader and they have now been running for almost a year - this often confounds the teachers amongst us!!

Our groups range from Ambling and Arts Visits, 5 Book groups, Bowling - the 10 pin type! Bird watching, Circle Dancing, Cycling, Languages, Musicians, Petanque, Philosophy, Photography, Real Ale appreciation, Walking and through to Yoga. Think of the activity involved therein!

You might notice we walk **and** we amble. A few years ago we just had a walking group and walked 5 or more miles on average. Then we noticed some people were always lagging

behind as the pace was beating them. So we started our 1st ambling group which walked shorter distances and at a slower pace. Then they practised and got better, so walked further 3- 4 miles. Then guess what - the pace got to a few of those members, so we started another amblers group to walk less than 3miles at a slower pace. Some of our colleagues think it should be called the Strollers, but we might need that group in the future!

### **So how does the u3a movement support people to remain active through transitions?**

So looking at the common changes we could meet in our Third Age : Bereavement (actual and loss of status), Cancer, Carer duties, Disability (deafness, sight loss, mobility), Divorce, Illness, Moving house / town, Poverty, Retirement and the emotional effect of such changes: Despair, Disbelief, Frozen, Relief, Shock, Withdrawal and lack of motivation, how can the U3A help?

When existing members experience such change - they already have a support network around them There are easy wins - continuing to attend our groups, they receive the support and concern from their peers, in both helping them to keep going (literally) and offering encouragement through phone calls and visits.

New members have been known to describe U3A as a "Life Saver" when they have been through one of these transitions and felt alone or depressed and losing motivation. Non members maybe have friends who are members and they bring them along. We have a web site which welcomes enquiries, to which you **do** get a speedy response.

We know that one of the most difficult steps when you feel alone is the first! Telephone contact generates an invitation to our monthly coffee mornings in town, in a local cafe, which are casual and welcoming, a small well known environment, so

new people soon feel at ease. Committee (and other) members are there to answer questions, and they get coffee!

At our monthly lecture meetings we have friendly "Greeters" who spend time with all new visitors and help them into the movement. Introducing them to another member to sit with.

Over recent years there has been publicity from Age UK and others about Loneliness, only a few days ago I watched a 70 year old lady talking on TV news, about how lonely and alone she feels. I wanted to shout out "Join your U3A". She relies on going to the shops to actually speak to someone - the shop keeper. I remember myself when I first retired doing exactly that when I didn't have a plan for that day!

You may have gathered that I have a broad view of being active! **You** might think the first step to an active life is the one that takes you out of your front door. I think being active starts with thinking, then raising motivation, then getting off your chair and onto your feet.

Luckily I live near town so can walk there every day. Just joining a club / group is tough at times, but we actively promote extending the u3a offer to all people in our community, as does the Third Age Trust on a national level.

In October, we put on a "Showcase" event in central Sudbury. At this event each of our Group Leaders had a stall explaining what they did and taking questions on how to join them.

As well as our existing members, the public were invited and we had 250 people through the door in 3 hours. As a result 50 people joined as members, several on the day. We also had requests for a dozen or so new groups and since then have already started up 8 new groups.

Just being around other people helps you think wider and gain confidence. Many of our members become volunteers in the

local area. Members also can grow into Group Leaders - the learner and teacher role is seamless. Our day and holiday trips support members who have lost confidence in travelling far and are usually oversubscribed - so we now have a team of members planning trips and visits.

We are developing a R.U.G. - to bring all the people who help in small ways together and encourage them to do more! Maybe become a group leader, join the committee, or just carry on helping in small ways. We like to feel wanted, don't we?

**So .... How can YOU help us? What about?**

Leisure providers:

Develop off peak membership in really quiet times - we are available during the day! Offer group sessions suitable for our age group - not just "Chair exercise" - we like the social contact rather than running the treadmill in the gym! Offer us use of your large spaces for table tennis / dancing; Special offers! Do you have meeting rooms? Have an awareness day and tell us all about how to keep active.

Local Politicians:

Acknowledgement of our U3As as big groups of your constituents; Consult us: Offer your council meeting rooms during the day; stop closing down meeting places; provide free public toilets; consider us for your locality budget.

Business providers:

We are wise shoppers - keep us satisfied! Increase "offers for singles! Offer to give a lecture now and again.

**So let's work together and we will achieve success!**