

SMU3A AGM Report from the Chair 2019 – 2020

This is the 9th AGM report of Shepton Mallet U3A and forms part of the virtual AGM of the 23 July 2020 and summarises the period since our last AGM held on 2 May 2019. It reflects on the events and issues including the period of lockdown restrictions due to the Covid 19 pandemic when meetings and group activities were suspended by the Government on 23 March 2020.

It has always been an ambition of the Committees to grow the membership of SMU3A and this year, just prior to lockdown, we achieved a membership role of 200. The enthusiasm of existing members and the range of activities, groups and outings we have offered have made this possible. So, the first of many ‘thanks’ to everyone who has helped achieve this.

In August 2019 we supported our local community with a stand at the Mid Somerset Show, this attracted a lot of attention and interest. With the help of many of you who volunteered on the day we raised our profile in the town and encouraged visitors to find out more about us.

Our website has had lots of viewings throughout the year and is an introduction to browsers of what we offer, this together with our excellent Newsletter provide information of what we are all about and is available both to members and non-members to read online and in local public places. Since the lockdown, these two avenues of information have been vital, my thanks go to Julia Goddard and Keith Taylor for their efforts to keep us all connected.

We know people sometimes join SMU3A for one particular reason. This year we introduced two, new but quite different groups – Short tennis and Photography. These have proved popular and encouraged new members as well as renewing interest from our existing members. As I have said before, the activities we share are the life blood of a successful U3A and we are so fortunate to have well over 20 members who run our groups. This takes their time, dedication and commitment. We are so grateful to them for arranging their lives every week or month so that the rest of us can just turn up and know that everything is arranged for us. More than ever, the present times remind us just how much we rely on the company of others. I thank them all, including Sue Dunne who as Group Leader coordinator supports, encourages and arranges an annual ‘thank you’ lunch in appreciation of their efforts.

It is part of the pattern of U3A life that a monthly Speaker Meeting is organised by Pete Norman. The MDC Mendip Chamber where we meet is a large, comfortable space where we can chat and socialise over a coffee, the only time and place where this opportunity arises and a chance to see those we may not otherwise bump into. Val Sherring and Jenny Wehfritz have provided a warm and friendly welcome to new members and been a great help on these occasions. During the year we were treated to a display by our Art group, and a variety styles and mediums showcased the talent of this group and it was a real pleasure to see such achievement. The range and standard of Speakers is always something to look forward to and we shall miss Pete, who worked so hard to secure Speakers to the end of this year, he leaves a vacancy we have yet to fill. Unfortunately, all meetings have had to be cancelled since April and no decision yet on when they might safely resume. One of our Speakers was the Chair of the Bowlish Heritage project and this led to the involvement of several of our members in helping to bring history to life in local primary schools. This outreach was led by Sue Dickerson and was much appreciated by the Bowlish Heritage project and the children and schools involved.

Looking back at all the outings arranged over the past 12 months I see that autumn 2019 had a definite equine theme with visits to Wincanton races, the John Boyd ‘horse hair factory’ in Castle Cary and a trip to the Donkey Sanctuary. The very last outing before lockdown was to the BBC Studios in Bristol, which was thoroughly enjoyed by those lucky enough to secure one of the limited places. Grateful thanks go to Janet Murray who continues to find interesting places for us to visit and has been able to call upon the assistance of Gill Wetherall and Lyn Hook when necessary. I know many of you have really missed these trips in recent months.

During May we embarked on a plan to use the internet for online enrolment due to the restrictions. Many U3A's operate in this way but we have always arranged a couple of very sociable mornings at the Shrubbery Hotel for this to take place. We were surprised how well this worked (sincere thanks to Keith for his technical expertise) and delighted by how many of you renewed your membership. Your support was a ringing endorsement of all we strive to do and an ‘act of faith’ for the future of SMU3A. As always, this process means a busy time for both Maggie Fowle our Membership Secretary and Jane Burman our Treasurer and so, on your behalf, I thank them very much for their efforts.

I said at the start of this report that we had achieved a membership of 200 members. At the present time we have 146. During this time of uncertainty this is not surprising but still represents nearly 75% renewal. We are not downhearted and have every confidence that numbers will creep up again as the year progresses and our lives are less restricted.

Our finances have been verified by an external bookkeeper and our accounting and banking systems are sound. We have sufficient funds to cover annual outgoings and expenses and the Committee continue to monitor our financial position monthly. All credit goes to Jane Burman for her skill in this area.

There have been no changes to our Constitution since the last AGM in May 2019 and we have held regular Committee meetings up to and including March this year. Since then, we have continued to set a monthly Agenda which Committee can view and comment on. Maggie Hardy, our Secretary compiles a report which includes finances, decisions, and other relevant information and this is agreed and filed. This works well for us currently and we have successfully adapted to the prevailing circumstances.

The Committee spent time and gave much thought to the proposals set out by the North Somerset Network of U3A's to move from an informal and social association to a formalised and constituted body including the agreement to an additional network Charity Commission status . The Committee felt that the burdens of responsibility already placed on Committee members should not be increased and therefore we declined to vote on this issue. We remain part of this network and the new Committee are free to decide to take a different view if they wish.

The North Somerset Association had arranged an inter U3A Photography competition and a Quiz to take place in March/April this year, both of which we agreed to take part in but were affected by the restrictions. The Quiz has been postponed to a date yet to be decided and although the judging of the photos took place the exhibition was cancelled. I know Maggie Hardy invested a great deal of time and patience in printing, mounting, displaying, and delivering all the photos submitted by our members and very many thanks to her for her efforts.

Filling Committee vacancies continues to be a problem and we share this dilemma with many other U3A's. There is always a possibility that a U3A is forced to close because no one wants to take on the responsibility of key roles – Chair, Vice Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. Please do not let this happen

in Shepton Mallet. In August we will hold the first Committee meeting of 2020 - 2021 and appoint Officers to these roles, if this is not possible, then it will be necessary to call an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) to consider the future of SMU3A. Please do get in touch if you can offer your time and commitment to keep SMU3A active in the local community.

We are saying goodbye and thank you to Derek Hiller who has been Vice Chair since June 2018. Derek, after many years of quietly fulfilling many roles in SMU3A including group leader, organising publicity and just doing what is required, when it is required has always showed qualities of reliability and resourcefulness that have been tremendous assets to our U3A.

We are also losing Pete Norman, Speaker Meeting organiser, who has been unstinting in his commitment to providing quality guests at our meetings and taking care of arrangements at the Council Chamber and I have never underestimated the importance of his role within SMU3A.

Finally, our thanks to Maggie Hardy, not only as Secretary but also for her good humour and tolerance and her help and great support in many other ways too.

I have completed two years as Chair following on from nearly two years as Secretary and I am ready and very willing to help someone else to make their own mark in this role. There is an opportunity and possibly a necessity to rethink how we organise and do things both within our U3A and nationally post Covid. We have all adapted to changes which we never imagined possible six months ago. Just because something has always happened or been done a certain way does not mean it cannot change to suit different circumstances and requirements. The chance of making things better should never be discounted.

My thanks go to everyone on the Committee for their diligence and commitment. Each one of these Trustees gives their time voluntarily and without their contribution we would not have achieved as much as we have or even exist.

There are many questions concerning U3A both locally and nationally yet to be answered. It is very evident that we all miss the social connection, the groups, and activities which SMU3A have provided us with in the past. There is no reason why these should not return in some form in the future provided we continue to share ideas, think about how we can support the Committee and continue to make sure that SMU3A remains a caring, enthusiastic, vibrant and very important part of members lives.

Thank you.

Liz Nash

Chair SMU3A

July 2020

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