

CHAIR'S REPORT TO THE AGM OF PRESTON AND DISTRICT u3a FOR 2021-22

The last 2 years have been a period of unprecedented challenge for the members of Preston and District u3a. 2020 saw us in a period of semi-permanent lockdown and 2021 saw a gradual emergence from a period of very restricted activity. None of us could have anticipated a period of crisis in our personal lives not experienced since the darkest days of the Second World War.

It is to the great credit of our organisation and its members that we are now beginning to emerge from this difficult period. However, we must recognise that many challenges lie ahead and despite progress in recent weeks the notion that Covid -19 is a thing of the past must be treated with extreme caution.

We responded to the restrictions in many creative ways. Some Groups continued to meet in limited numbers using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Others developed social networking links via Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media means to maintain contact with their members. The "old fashioned" telephone and letter made a welcome comeback. In particular so many members realised that others faced long weeks and months of lonely isolation and did what they could to alleviate this. Quizzes, Chats, Desert Island Discs and Zoom Speaker Meetings helped.

At the start of the Pandemic many at national level saw a bleak future for u3a. Predictions of a fall in membership numbers approaching 20% were widely circulated. I'm happy to report that our local experience has bucked this trend. As I write our membership numbers have again exceeded 700 and almost 100 new members have joined since 1st April 2021. Our challenge as a Committee and an organisation is to give our new and existing membership "bang for their buck" in terms of a vibrant Interest Group structure and an interesting programme of All Member events.

To this end our External Groups started to open up from March 2021 as soon as regulations permitted and participation levels in their activities have matched and in a number of cases exceeded pre-pandemic levels. So many members expressed relief that they were able to enjoy friendship and face to face fellowship once more.

From July 2021 onwards our Internal Groups began the slow process of re-establishing their meetings and by September almost all Groups had re-opened. Of course, at the start numbers taking part were somewhat reduced as many people understandably adopted a cautious approach to socialising. We must never forget the savage toll exacted by the virus.

As we move into 2022 however, I sense some renewed optimism. Attendance numbers at Group and All Member events have started to rise and we are rescheduling our Events Calendar to promote a number of Events postponed from 2019. We are also looking to promote new Events and look forward to the establishment of some new Groups in addition to the 60+ we already have. It is also my fervent hope that in 2022 and beyond we will again be able to raise our profile in our Community and reach out to areas and people where we are currently under represented.

Preston and District u3a is nothing without its Volunteers. So, my sincere thanks go to all of our Group Leaders who have kept us going during dark days. To those Group Leaders who have decided that after many years of invaluable service that the time has come to "hang up their boots" and to those who have taken up the challenge of succeeding them!

We owe a debt of gratitude to the individual members who produce the Weekly Newsletter, maintain and develop the Website, produce the twice yearly "Good Times" magazine and work to make new members feel welcome. Their efforts are much appreciated.

The Chair is only as good as his Committee. I should like to sign off by paying tribute to all my colleagues on your Committee who have helped and supported me during my first year in office. Two of our long standing Committee members are standing down after 15 years+ combined service. Their contribution has been immense particularly in ensuring that despite the problems of the past two years our finances remain in robust health. And my final thanks go to you, our members. Thank you for loyally supporting us during these challenging times and we look forward to providing a strong programme for your interest and enjoyment in the year to come. Indeed, we must LEARN, LIVE, LAUGH!

Tony Cheetham

Chair Preston and District u3a