

Group Organisers' Conference 12th May 2015

Introduction

The following summarises all comments raised during the Group Organisers' Conference reflecting the key issues members were asked to consider, as follows:

- Things we do well
- Problems and issues
- New ideas

Things we do well

There were many positive responses indicating our U3A is doing very well. The management structure was considered to be good, democratic and well run and allows independence to Group Organisers to run things their own way but in the knowledge that there is back up from the central Executive Committee and also from the National Office. The size of our U3A was seen in a positive way enabling a wide range of interest groups to exist and, together with our open meetings we can cater for a wide range of interests. Friendliness, enthusiasm, socialising, networking and the ability to learn new things were all seen as positive aspects of our U3A. Our Communications using regular Newsletters, flyers and the website were commented on but there is room for improvement. Sevenoaks U3A is seen as good value for money and our close relationship with Knole via shared groups and some social events was also seen in a positive way.

Problems and issues

Against the positive views a number of problem areas were identified. These are as follows:

- Some long term members are now less active and unable to get to meetings.
- Communication is a problem; we are in a period of transition to IT systems. The posted Newsletter is becoming prohibitively expensive but we have a number of members who do not have access to computer facilities so a dual approach to communications with our members will need to be maintained for some time to come.
- The wide range of groups and events offered can cause problems with diary clashes and some overlap as our members tend to belong to other societies in addition to our U3A
- Group organisers feel they have to do everything and find some members do not participate to the extent expected. It was suggested that assistants or deputies could be established and training given for new GOs.
- In some instances, long running groups are seen as closed and unwelcoming by new members; it is suggested that new groups should be formed in such cases.
- Fear of making presentations was seen as a factor for not joining some groups and a misconception that presentations need to be given using IT systems.
- New members feel excluded and needed help to integrate into our U3A. Revision of the "Buddy" system was recommended to overcome this during the first few months.
- The number of new groups starting up does not reflect the intake of new members.
- Social events and outings were considered by some to not be meeting the ethos of the U3A.
- Health and safety issues were raised, and a need for workshops to explore issues was suggested.

- Groups that are too big for domestic gatherings require halls and the hire for these was felt to be a central responsibility but any cost incurred has to be amortised across the members of the group.

New Ideas

A number of suggestions were offered. However, some of these ideas already exist but were unknown to the GOs emphasising the need to raise awareness and to communicate where this information can be easily accessed. In addition, it was felt that we need to improve the way in which we disseminate information about future events and outings. A review of our advertising approach was considered necessary as it was felt that many members just do not read information placed in the Newsletter or flyers and a fresh approach to these is required. It was suggested that as we have around 120 groups, much more information about Group activity should appear in the Newsletters. This valuable source of information has remained largely untapped.

Some GOs felt that we do need to advertise more openly for new members rather than just relying on word of mouth as this was seen as a way of refreshing our U3A and would bring in a diverse range of members.

Where groups run parallel activities, some cross fertilisation could be encouraged in the form of a member from one group giving a talk to another.

Conclusions and way forward

Many ideas were generated and there were some clear messages, primarily over communication. This is particularly true of the relationship with Knole U3A, shared groups and social outings. There is already a networking arrangement with other U3As and best practice is shared but this information has not been visible to GOs or members. Much of this data is now internet based so if GOs do not use these facilities then information will be missed. Raising awareness of existing information to help GOs is a priority. Messages placed in Newsletters just do not seem to have been recognised by some GOs or members. This probably indicates that a review of the Newsletter and a fresh look is needed to convey the right messages.

The Executive Committee will address the issues raised and the following key points will be followed up:

- Improve communications between the Executive Committee, Group Organisers and Members
- Revise the "Buddy" system to help new members integrate and become more active in our U3A
- Introduce topics via workshops and training to support Group Organisers
- Improve advertising and refresh the Newsletter
- Improve awareness of publications that already exist such as the National Office Advice Sheets and documents produced by us

Hopefully, issuing the new Group Organisers' Guide will help in disseminating some of this information but further interaction will be necessary to cover all issues raised.

Group Development Team 16th June 2015