

An open letter to all u3a members from Chair of the Third Age Trust, Liz Thackray

The past 18 months have been difficult for all of us as we have found ourselves living lives in ways we never expected. None of us could have foreseen a worldwide pandemic, lockdowns, and all the restrictions on our way of living. Although we are now moving towards a time when it is likely we need to learn to live with covid, many of us are still nervous about returning to what was our normal way of life, while others cannot wait to meet up again.

Whether we like it or not we have all been affected by the changes in our lifestyle and expectations over the past months. This is irrespective of whether or not we have ourselves suffered a covid infection or have experienced the suffering – and perhaps death – of close friends or family members. We have all made adaptations in our lifestyle as we have adopted technology or gone out of our way in different ways to ensure we keep in touch with our friends, especially those most vulnerable.

As u3a members, we have benefitted enormously from the work undertaken by our local committees, by the support provided by volunteers working directly with the Third Age Trust and the work undertaken by the staff team. Without the enormous amount of voluntary effort by so many people, our movement would not be continuing to thrive. However, unfortunately sometimes surviving through adversity can lead to us not always appreciating properly the support we receive.

As u3a members, we belong to a movement built on principles of mutual aid and self-help. Although we may join the u3a in order to learn a new skill or to enjoy meeting new people, we also join a movement where we are all volunteers with something to contribute – and that is our greatest strength! However, we also recognise that the mantra ‘by the members, for the members’ is not always sufficient. Changes in legislation over the past 40 years have led to all voluntary organisations needing to develop new procedures in order to stay legal – and never has this been more true than in the past months of pandemic.

The u3a is fortunate in that we have a small group of staff employed to support our movement. However, at times we need to remember that there are fewer than 20 staff members, not all full-time, supporting a movement of well over a thousand u3as and over 400,000 u3a members. Those staff have suffered the same restrictions and pressures as the rest of us through the past months, but

many of them have worked far more than their contracted hours in order to provide us with information, advice and support.

Sometimes we all get impatient when we do not receive answers to queries as speedily as we would wish. Sometimes we do not like the advice we receive. Sometimes we want to argue and complain that information or advice is inaccurate. I would urge us all, including me, to remember the staff team are only human. When we feel like complaining about not receiving a response to a query or difficulty accessing a named member of staff or getting the telephone answered or not being able to find information on the website, we all need to remember we are dealing with human beings who are doing their best under difficult circumstances.

At this time, we all need to be even more kind and considerate to those around us than we might have been previously. We are all feeling the challenges of covid and we need each other even more as we continue to live, laugh and learn together.

Liz Thackray.