

I am delighted to say that we have had a very successful year, during which we continued to celebrate our 25th anniversary. The Mayor, David Neve, joined us to raise a toast during last year's AGM and the following month we had an entertaining talk from Eric Midwinter, one of the founder members of the UK U3A. Our October lunch at the Masonic Hall was extremely well-received and consequently we have booked the venue for our Christmas lunch.

This success has also been reflected in our membership figures. At the last AGM we had nearly 950 members, which had increased to 1,000 by the time of our anniversary lunch and we now have over 1,100 members. It is very gratifying that the majority of our new members have heard about us from friends or family, which is a great advertisement for us as a friendly and welcoming group. Word of mouth is always the best recommendation.

Our success is built on the foundations laid by our previous members and in particular our committee members. Joy Podbury has been a hard act to follow as Chairman. Joy worked tirelessly for U3A and smoothly steered the group through slightly less optimistic times. Di Brown was a great Membership Secretary and Vice Chairman. John Cunliffe stepped down as Newsletter Editor after many years invaluable work. Pat Micklewright did sterling work as Chairman of the Outings Committee. They were all much appreciated and I am very grateful to the members who have stepped up and taken their place. Jan Sumner took over as Groups Co-ordinator, Eryll Fabian as Newsletter Editor, Sandra McDonald as Outings Committee Chairman and last but by no means least, Adrian Twiner as Business Secretary. Together with Ruth, David, Wendy and Alison they have all been a very supportive and pro-active committee. Wendy has kindly offered to complete a further term as Secretary and Alison has decided to step down from the committee after several years in various roles, all of which she has carried out with smooth efficiency and a welcoming smile.

With the increase in membership comes a need to ensure that we operate as efficiently as possible. Our use of the new membership system, Beacon, is an important aspect of this, and we intend to use it more, especially as a method of renewing subscriptions. We've also changed the way we keep our members up to date, by replacing the handbook with our new information pack. The pack was produced and sent out by our printer, saving the effort of stuffing and posting a thousand envelopes. Going forward, it will reduce our printing costs and also mean that we can provide new members with a more accurate resource.

David, our Treasurer, will be giving his report and I don't want to steal his thunder, but the steps we took to reduce our reserves by reducing the membership rates for new members and waiving them for existing members, were successful and appreciated by all our members.

When I speak to other U3As, I realise how buoyant and forward looking our group is. Our outings are always full, our groups continue to increase, and we are introducing short study seminars and social events. However, with so many new members

joining we can't afford to be complacent and we do need to continue to set up new groups, particularly where we have waiting lists.

Other areas to explore this year are the potential for getting involved in research and on-line courses. As an example of research, Meopham U3A have been involved in a study looking at local bee species and monitoring their numbers. In terms of on-line courses, there are currently nearly 7,000 short courses available that are either free or have a small charge and at the end of 2016, 58 million people had signed up to them globally. They are known as MOOCS, massive open on-line courses and typically last for 4 to 6 weeks. Some U3As have set up groups that sign up for a course, which members complete individually and hold regular meetings during the course to discuss their progress and thoughts.

In summary, we have had much to celebrate this year and I'm sure that we'll continue to grow and extend the opportunities that we provide.

Sue Brimlow
May 2017.