

A Start at Watford. Reg Cooke.

In his Chairman's message to Harrow U3A just prior to the 1997 A.G.M., Maurice Soffa raised the question of the effect of the expanding catchment area for Harrow U3A on its capacity to accommodate the interest of new members.

To consider the alternatives, at the request of the Harrow Management Committee, a working party was set up in March 1997. It comprised Frank Berg, Harrow Membership Secretary; Georgina Butcher, Ian Bowker and myself as chairman. The brief was to consider setting up a group in the Watford area.

Initially there was a view that such an initiative was really the function of the National Office. After some debate and knowing the limitations of the capacity of the National Office it was decided to press ahead at Harrow, keep the National Office informed and seek their help when appropriate. This view was subsequently justified when later in the year Third Age News published an article on starting up branches in neighbouring areas, and issued their "Starter Pack" of advisory pamphlets. It had also been reported that previous attempts in the Watford area had not met with sufficient support.

The first step of course was arranging publicity in the selected area. Initially it was decided to publish in the Local Newspapers and post notices in the local libraries. Since Harrow wished to maintain a low profile to avoid publicity resulting in more applications for membership, publicity was designed to route enquiries via the National Office. A simple suffix was added to the National Office address on the publicity leaflet so that any enquiries could be routed to the Harrow Working party without the need for the National Office to open the correspondence.

At the time the only publicity documents available were an A4 size folded leaflet, prominently labelled University of the Third Age, giving an abbreviated statement of the aims and carrying the National Office address. Surplus copies of Third Age News and numerous variations on the theme of the objects and principles of the U3A were also available. A copy of a statement contained in Peter Sinclair's Internet Information was eventually selected as appropriate; a fly sheet was prepared from this and attached to the front page of surplus copies of the Spring issue of The Third Age News.

Agreement was obtained from the Herts. County Library Headquarters that I could contact the Head Librarian of seven selected branches in the Watford/ Rickmansworth area, to seek their help in displaying the publicity material.

I set out to deliver the material. My first visit was to the library branch in Sparrows Hearne, Bushey. Inevitably it was closed, but I was able to see through the window a member of staff conducting a party of children around the library. By persistently tapping on the window the door was reluctantly opened and I left some material, having learned that only this branch was closed on that particular day.

My next stop was Watford Central Library and it transpired that this was to be highly significant in the Watford start up. I met Iris Oakey, the Library Development Manager and explained our intention to start a U3A activity in the area. She was pleased to hear this as they had frequent enquiries from people about the existence of the U3A in Watford. Not only was she prepared to display our material in the Central Library, but to save me the job of visiting the other branches she undertook to circulate the publicity material to them. At a later stage she also agreed that we could use the Library address as a post box for enquiries from the public, thereby relieving the National Office of this function and giving a more local flavour to the activity. At the same time The Watford Observer agreed to publish a letter announcing the activity.

After about a month we had received some seven or eight inquiring letters, but had also arrived into the holiday period. In an attempt to stimulate the interest, notices were delivered to the local YMCA, Watford Museum and similar locations and activities, together with some 300 copies of the folded U3A publicity leaflet. Also at around this time Third Age News published the article on starting up new branches and offering a start up pack of leaflets to assist the activity.

The other contact which was to prove highly significant was with a free magazine Optima, published fortnightly in our area of interest. I was unable to make personal contact with the Editor on my initial visit, but left copies of the U3A leaflet and the original fly sheet describing the objects and principles. Subsequent telephone contacts assured me they would eventually give publicity to our activity.

There was not a lot of response to the stimulation. In fairness to those who had responded we felt an Inaugural Meeting should be arranged. The lecture room at Watford Central Library was offered and a meeting was arranged for 29 September 97. Watford Observer and Optima were asked to announce the meeting in their "What's On" columns, and we notified the original inquirers of the date and venue.

On the 26 September 97, three days before the meeting and on one of their normal fortnightly publishing days, Optima ran an excellent full page article headed "Sharing Knowledge" outlining the objects and principles of U3A.

On the 29 September The Harrow Working Party, supported by Peter Sinclair in the absence of Maurice Soffa due to previous commitments, arrived at Watford central Library for the meeting. Iris Oakey had arranged seating accommodation for about twenty people, plus coffee and biscuits.

Approaching the scheduled 10.00am start people began to arrive, and to the surprise of the Working Party some 40 people arrived, mainly, it transpired, as the result of the Optima article. The meeting got under way and there was little doubt about the level of interest of those who attended. After an introductory talk by myself and Peter Sinclair a proposition that a Watford group of the U3A should be formed was put to the meeting and carried unanimously. I was nominated to act as Chairman of a steering Committee. Six members of the audience, Anna McColl, Marie Coe, Tony Platts, Valerie Webster, Glenda Morren and Molly Fitzpatrick, already a member of Harrow U3A, but resident in Watford, readily volunteered to form a Steering Committee and a Watford group was in business. A request for donations to provide for initial expenses resulted in a sum of £46.25, a generous start. A second meeting was arranged for 10th November. Immediately subsequent to the meeting, as a result of telephone enquiries from people unable to make the Inaugural Meeting, the number of people interested rose to around 60.

The second meeting on 10th November was attended by in excess of 120 people, confirming the interest in the U3A. The formation of Study Groups, the proposed levels of subscription and a fixed day for monthly meetings was established. Bob Edmunds, U3A Trust Coordinator for Hertfordshire was introduced to the meeting, as was Sonja Goodman, Curator of Watford Museum who spoke on the Museum's facilities.

Spontaneous offers of help came from the Harrow Working Party, from Discussion Group Leaders, and from a retired Harrow Treasurer. Molly Fitzpatrick, a very active Harrow member who lived in Watford volunteered to act as study Group Coordinator. Tony Platts, one of the computer literate Watford enthusiasts, in conjunction with Paul Baron, Harrow's Vice Chairman and computer expert, cooperated to, produce an impressive and business-like range of the necessary forms and U3A headed paperwork. One Watford member had already offered the use of her house to accommodate study groups prior to the Inaugural Meeting.

As a result of a tremendous response, we have to date 25 proposed study groups with leaders. 13 other interests have been listed. On reflection the pattern of interest follows the typical U3A approach. The Steering Committee are working towards the formation of a Management Committee, application for membership of The Third Age Trust and Charitable status. Their initial enthusiasm continues unabated. If members' enthusiasm is maintained, Watford and District U3A will thrive. Its association with Watford Central Library is a natural one and should have mutual advantages.