

U3A Networks (2018)

This is a short information brief setting out the overall position regarding “networks” within the U3A family.

All U3A’s are independent organisations. Although important in terms of, for example, liaising with the Charity Commission, the Third Age Trust (TAT) is in practice an overarching advisory body that provides support to local U3As. It cannot direct what U3As should do as a Head Office. However recently TAT has shown an increasingly interest in understanding and helping to develop networks of U3As in the belief that they are an underused collective resource.

The practical effect of this situation is that if U3A’s wish to communicate/liaise/work with other U3As on a regular basis, they have to make their own arrangements. Over time this led to the creation, on an ad hoc basis, of networks entirely set up, run and financed by local U3As. Recently this has become more structured. Currently there are three levels of network. These are local (North London), regional (London) and National.

North London is a small group of potentially nine U3A in North Central London. iU3A has sent two delegates (Chris, Margaret) to this network. It was set up about four years ago but has not really picked up much support and is currently inactive. It met about three times a year. In the short term this network needs to clarify its purpose and modus operandi.

London Network. Covering 44 U3As in London it has a formal structure of a constitution, executive, delegate meetings four times a year which discuss issues of mutual interest, promotes learning events and acts as a conduit for advertising learning events in local U3As. Currently iU3A has two Executive members Derek (Webmaster) and Chris (Vice Chair North Thames). They also act as the two delegates although this is not a requirement. Sally has offered to be a delegate. It has a very comprehensive website which is easily accessed. <https://u3asites.org.uk/london-region/home>

A major issue discussed by the London Network Executive is the poor quality of feedback/communication from the London Network to local U3As through the delegates.

Importantly the London Network provides the only formal link to TAT/national office through the London Trustee who is a member of the TAT Executive Committee. The Trustee, elected by London U3As and invited to London meetings, provides updates on national issues and has an annual budget available for U3As for example to provide grants to support Open Days.

National Network. Established in 2017, it meets twice a year and our delegate is the London Network delegate to this national meeting. Currently it is still exploring the most effective means of working.

Attitudes to networking amongst U3As vary greatly perhaps because participation is entirely voluntary. They are entirely what the participants want to make of them. This applies equally to Islington U3A.

Chris Bulford