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Spring is in the air (hopefully)!

Welcome to the March edition...

It's a great time of year to start thinking about your next house move, or having a Spring clean, or maybe getting around to those home and garden improvements you've been putting off and off...

We have a wide range of organisations and tradespeople who advertise in here who are all local and keen to take on more work in the area. Don't forget Mothers' Day on Sunday 14th March – even if you can't take her out for a slap-up meal you can tell her how much she means to you!

Until next month...



Zoe Reece

Tel: 07557 220585

Email: zoe@dorridgedirectory.com

www.solihullindex.com



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Can a Spring Clean be Green?

When the spring light catches the surfaces in my home, I see smears and dust, and I fall victim to 'the spring-cleaning bug'. Suddenly I want to scrub, dust and polish everything in sight.

A few years ago, I made a big effort to become a 'greener cleaner'. I worried about the active ingredients in my cleaning products and wondered how much damage that chemical cocktail was doing to the planet?

Most of us have a miniature chemical factory stashed under our sinks: detergents, bleaches, and degreasers, all containing potentially hazardous substances which find their way into groundwater and contaminate the lakes and the oceans.

Phosphates are some of the main culprits. They are common in laundry detergents and some cleaning products. An average consumer uses the equivalent of 14Kg of detergent a year. High phosphate levels in water cause 'algae blooms' which contribute to the death of fish and other water-dwelling creatures. These algae blooms are becoming more common thanks to a combination of pollutants and global warming.

Cleaning products can have an adverse effect on our health. Household ammonia is often found in window or general glass cleaners. It is a skin and eye irritant and deadly to fish, even in low concentrations, so it's not something we should flush down our drains. Sodium hypochlorite (bleach) is corrosive and an eye, skin, and respiratory irritant. It is especially toxic to people with heart conditions or asthma. D-limonene is a degreaser found in citrus and orange cleaners. It is also a neurotoxin, an irritant and can cause respiratory distress.

But as I investigated Eco products I stumbled into a minefield. Many big companies produce eco-brands, but this involves 'greenwashing',



which is defined as an attempt to make consumers believe a company is doing more to protect the environment than it actually is. They use unregulated words like 'natural' and 'eco-friendly' while still using potentially harmful chemicals. They don't list ingredients or information about manufacture and supply, and if you check their websites there are no environmental targets published nor information about progress on their environmental impact.

I won't lie, truly environmentally friendly products are more expensive so the cheapest way to do a green spring clean is to make your own and there are some great websites around with detailed instructions on how to do just this.

I did try to make my own but found that work constraints meant I struggled with some of the more time-consuming concoctions, but I've listed a couple of websites in case you feel you'd like to try this. I am a huge fan of distilled white vinegar which I use to clean toilets, windows, and mirrors. I also like Bicarbonate of Soda which is a great degreaser, scouring agent, and deodoriser. For ready-made cleaning products I've suggested a couple of UK websites which are certified environmentally and vegan friendly.

I'm not perfect. Sometimes I do grab a regular cleaning product for convenience but I'm gradually becoming greener and if we all switched even one or two of our products for a greener cleaner, the planet would thank us.



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Upskill for Brain Health

Learning new things has all kinds of fringe benefits.

Lots of us began 2021 with the ambition to learn a new skill: beginner's computer programming, conversational Italian, or how to paint with watercolours maybe. We learn new skills for many reasons. Perhaps we need to improve our computer literacy to gain a promotion, or Italian so we can speak to our new in-laws, or we've always fancied learning to paint. Learning is fun but its benefits go way beyond the actual skill learned, and the skill is irrelevant, whether its crochet or advanced mathematics, the extra benefits are the same.

Positive brain changes - The white matter in our brain is comprised of nerve fibres covered in a fatty sheath called myelin. It is involved in learning and co-ordination of communication between different brain regions. The more we practice a new skill the more our white matter increases in density, which helps us when we learn other new skills.

Increased learning speed - When brain neurons are stimulated, more neural pathways are formed and the faster our brains process new information. It's as if 'learning' is a muscle which strengthens as its exercised.

Interconnections - When we learn a new skill our brains draw on information and skills we already possess, and we build on that existing knowledge. But a wide knowledge base also makes it easier for us to learn more new skills.

Increased interestingness! - (Yes, it's a real word!) Well-rounded individuals tend to find it easier to relate to others because a wider knowledge base makes it easier to find



things in common and thus make friends.

Beat boredom - Repetition can quickly become monotonous. Following the same routine every night, 'supper, bath, TV, bed' makes it easy to become bored. Learning new things breaks the cycle of monotony and gives our brain something to do.

Increased adaptability - Learning new things physically alters our brains in such a way that our outlook and perceptions change. These alterations make it easier for us to adapt to sudden life changes, like a global pandemic for instance! Adapting to change is a skill, and the more varied our life experiences are, the easier it is to draw on them and adjust

Prevent cognitive decline - Learning origami doesn't mean we won't get dementia. There are many types of dementia and the causes are nuanced. But there are many studies which suggest that people who learn new skills are less likely to experience cognitive decline including dementia. Mental decline is linked to demyelination of our brain. People who actively learn new skills are not giving their brains a chance to demyelinate, and their neural pathways are primed to create workarounds if some area of the brain does begin to fail. The key seems to be to learn things outside of our comfort zone, so if you are a knitter, don't choose to learn crochet, which is similar, choose Russian, or salsa dancing, or the ukulele instead, subjects which push you out of your comfort zone, but (importantly) which



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Activate! Keeping Kids Fit

The National Child Measurement Programme for England (NCMP) includes nearly all children in reception year (aged 4-5) and year 6 (aged 10-11). According to their statistics 10% of reception age children are obese (not just overweight) and this figure rises to around 20% by year 6. We've spent a year with kids not being in school, and for the most part not being allowed out to play so experts expect this figure to rise. The scientific advice is that children should engage in 60 minutes of physical activity each day and encouraging them to become more active now will help them maintain a healthy weight, improve their general fitness and wellbeing and reduce the risks of serious health problems in the future. So, what can we do when activities are still restricted? **Be the Example** - Children will model the behaviour of their parents. If they see you are active, they are more likely to be active. If they see

you watching television, eating jammy dodgers, so will they. **Exercise with them** - Go cycling or walking together or put on an exercise DVD and do it together as a family.

Give them chores - Doing a bit of vigorous vacuuming or walking up and down stairs a few times putting laundry away will get the cardiovascular system working. **Play with Your Kids** - Play tag or run-around games. Try an egg and spoon race, or Twister...anything to get them (and you) moving. **Be the Parent** - We need to encourage healthy behaviours and limit unhealthy ones – sometimes this means making unpopular decisions like limiting your children's screen time outside of home-school hours. Make these tough decisions for your children but explain why. They may not recognise the benefits immediately, but the idea will percolate and feed into decisions they make for themselves in the future.



Kids' Page

Symbol Sudoku!



Can you complete the grid so that each row, column and 2x2 box, contains the four symbols with no repetition?

Spot the Difference

Can you spot the 7 differences between these two magicians?



Black bow tie
Stars missing from the hat
Brown wand
Green eyes

Stars on the inside of the cape
Gold button
Red belt



Sudoku Solution

Spot the Difference

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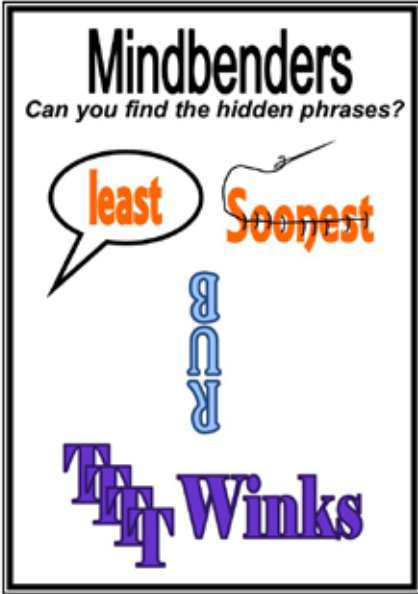
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answers on page 29

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Is Summer Back On?

After Boris Johnson's latest statement, moods have been lifted at the thought of having a summer where holidays are back on the cards. It has to be mentioned, that it is down to review, but it gives us a glimmer of hope that we can get back to enjoying the world, just in a slightly different way.

As it stands currently, international travel could begin to open up in mid-May at the earliest. And this has been reflected in the demand for summer holidays that has happened, quite literally, overnight!

Staycations

Staycations, or holidaying at home, has shot to the top of people's holiday lists in the last year, and people are starting to realise that the UK is a glorious destination for a break. A perfect way to spend time with your loved ones, a staycation is a great way to ease back into the world of travel. And it's come as no surprise, seeing as domestic holidays are set to open earlier than international travel.

We can look back at last year when staycations began operating again, and one of our suppliers, Hoseasons, reported a booking every 11 seconds!

This does mean that you do need to be quick however as availability is already limited, especially if you're looking to get away during summer. You need to act fast to book what you want, rather than what's left.

Turkey

A country of incredible contrasts, Turkey has always been a firm favourite among UK holidaymakers, thanks to soaring temperatures in mid-summer, as well as its diverse offerings of activities.

From the stunning beaches of Olu Deniz, vibrant markets in Fethiye, and the bustling city of Istanbul, there's always plenty to do and see. Choose to opt-in for an all-inclusive holiday and truly sit back and relax, or perhaps go self-catering and taste the divine delicacies found through the markets and local restaurants.

Greece

A trip to Greece is full of Mediterranean flare, incredible beaches and centuries-old sights. It's a land steeped in ancient myths, mind-blowing dining and spectacular scenery that tourists flock to every year.

It really does tick all the boxes when it comes to a perfect holiday, whether you're a sun worshipper wanting a week



in the sun, or an adventure-loving seeking new adrenaline highs, Greece has it all.

Spain

Mainland, Balearics or Canary Islands? The choice is yours. Think paella, sangria and blissful heat. There's a reason is one of the most popular hotspots in Europe.

From adult-only hotels to family-focused resorts, you really will be spoilt. Spend your days lazing by the beach, racing down slides and the water parks, and your evenings wandering the incredible market stalls.

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Tools of the trade

The right tools make gardening easier, and in my opinion you should buy the best you can afford then look after them so they will last many years. But which tools are essential?

Gloves - Gardening is hard on the hands. Weeds, roots and digging are brutal on the skin. Buy a thick, good quality multi-purpose pair to begin with. Make sure they fit. My first pair were too large and cumbersome. I was so naive I didn't realise they came in different sizes...much like gardens...and gardeners!

Secateurs - The task of pruning comes around with alarming regularity, so a good pair of secateurs is one of the most used items in my garden tool kit. Find a pair that feel good to hold, are well-balanced and easy to operate with one hand. Keep them clean and sharp and they will serve you well for many seasons.

Trowel - Useful for hand weeding, dividing smaller plants, planting, potting on, and seed sowing.

Hand Fork - A hand fork is essential for breaking up compacted soil. Sometimes it's easier to use than a trowel and is less likely to damage roots in more densely planted areas or when separating smaller plants.

I like a comfort handle for my hand tools but make sure to choose tools where the shaft of the handle and trowel (or fork) are one unit, not welded or rivetted together, as they are not as strong and snap with repeated use. I choose stainless-steel tools because they are rust resistant.

Watering can - A large watering can is great, but very heavy when full so if you have arthritis or not much upper body strength choose a smaller watering can that you can handle easily and make a few more trips to the tap. A rose allows for a gentle sprinkler effect on tiny



seeds and seedlings. You can use a hose if you garden a larger area. Choose a multi-tasking one with misting and sprinkler attachments

Spade - You can't dig large areas without one. As with hand tools, I prefer stainless steel. Keep it clean, with a sharp edge for digging, planting, and edging beds. Choose one that feels right for your height.

Fork - A stainless-steel fork is great for stony soil, and for breaking up compacted earth. It's also good for lifting shrubs without damaging the root system too much.

Dutch Hoe - Weeding is a necessary task (and a somewhat relentless one during the growing season). The Dutch hoe has a shallow angled blade with a front cutting edge for keeping weeds down between seedlings and established shrubs and plants.

Ground rake - Use this for breaking down the soil to that fine tilth gardening books go on about. Use the wide head and teeth to open and level the top surface of the soil, then use the back of the rake to firm it down. It makes seed-sowing easier and more likely to produce healthy seedlings.

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Have you ever seen the fruit in the photo and wondered, 'What is that? How would I even begin to eat it?'

Starting with the 'what?', it's a Dragon Fruit, sometimes called a pitahaya or even a strawberry pear.

A ripe fruit has bright red/pink, evenly coloured skin that gives slightly when squeezed, like a ripe mango or avocado. To eat it you cut it in half using a sharp knife to reveal the sweet seed-speckled pulp, which you scoop out with a spoon.

Dragon fruit is low in calories but packed with essential vitamins, minerals, and fibre. It's also high in beneficial plant compounds like polyphenols, carotenoids and betacyanins which have antioxidant

and anti-inflammatory properties. Studies suggest that diets high in antioxidants are key to helping prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and arthritis. Dietary fibre is important for gut health and Dragon fruits also contain prebiotics which help promote good gut bacteria.

Dragon contains more magnesium than most fruits. One Dragon fruit provides 18% of your recommended daily intake. Magnesium is present in every one of our cells and is integral to 600 important bodily biochemical chemical reactions including the breakdown of food into energy, muscle contraction and bone formation.

Enjoy it in salads, smoothies, and yogurt, or simply grab a spoon and dig in.

a good read

reviews By Willow Coby

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo

by Stieg Larsson

First published in English just over a decade ago this Swedish thriller – the first of a trilogy – was a huge hit. It was a time when Nordic Noir was just starting to take off in this country and remains a classic of the genre. So I was interested to see if it stood up to a re-read 12 years later, and it certainly does.

Mikael Blomkvist is an investigative journalist but a recent article about the wealthy Swedish financier Wennerstrom has landed him with a two month prison sentence for libel. But while waiting for his sentence to begin Blomkvist receives an unusual job offer from millionaire industrialist Henrik Vanger. He wants Blomkvist to investigate the murder of his great-niece, Harriet, forty years earlier. He takes the job, moving to the island where the Vangers live. He ends up turning to computer hacker Lisbeth Salander for help, a young woman who has no tolerance for others, society, or the law. What appears to be a simple thriller on the surface offers so much more. From corruption in Swedish society to attitudes towards women in Sweden, this evocative novel is satisfying, if violent. As a reader you feel part of the action as you move with the characters from Sweden to Heby Island. Here, more than in many other novels, the geography of Sweden feels like a character in its own right and the mood of the characters and the pace itself cleverly switches as we move from one to the other. For me this was the most satisfying part of this exemplar of the Nordic Noir genre.



The Werepuppy

by Jacqueline Wilson

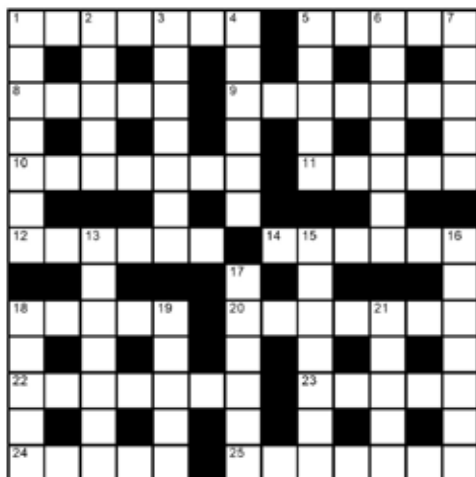
Y Mickey has four sisters, and three of them are older than him. He doesn't get on with them and is frequently teased. Then one night his parents go out, leaving the three older girls, Meryl, Mandy, and Mona, in charge. Delighted to have the house to themselves the girls decide to watch Savage Snarl a scary werewolf movie.

And it really IS scary. Even the older girls think so. But for Mickey it has a lasting effect: he becomes scared of dogs. Unsure what to do, his mum decides that the only real solution is to buy Mickey a puppy of his own! Dragged to the dog rescue home Mickey would rather be anywhere else until he encounters one puppy who bites his younger sister's finger. Could this be Mickey's very own werewolf – or werepuppy! Wolfie, as he is called, is no ordinary puppy and turns out to be the best pet that any boy could ask for!



crossword

clues



Across

- 1 Grand house (7)
- 5 Verifiable truths (5)
- 8 Dividends, earnings (5)
- 9 Ghoulish, spooky (7)
- 10 Evened the score (7)
- 11 Coach, teach (5)
- 12 Animosity, hatred (6)
- 14 Stick, attach (6)
- 18 Permit (5)
- 20 Sincere (7)
- 22 Beasts (7)
- 23 Belief (5)
- 24 Ledge (5)
- 25 Pudding (7)

Down

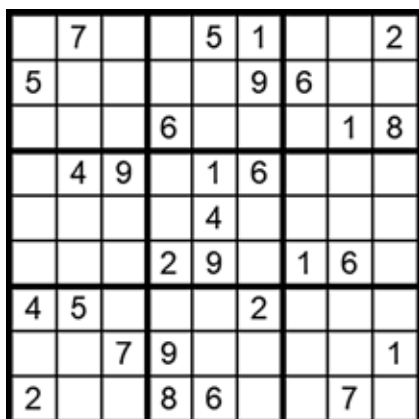
- 1 Important business person (7)
- 2 Sound (5)
- 3 Brilliance, astuteness (7)
- 4 Wanderers, travellers (6)
- 5 One side of a many-sided object (5)
- 6 Savoy, Red, or Napa (7)
- 7 Severe, sombre (5)
- 13 Depression, sickness (7)
- 15 Ridicules (7)
- 16 Drain, take out (7)
- 17 Stopped (6)
- 18 Collect, compile (5)
- 19 Dock, levee (5)
- 21 Bald, Golden or Pygmy (5)

answer on page 45

how to play sudoku

It's simple!

Fill in the grid so that each row, column and 3x3 box, contains the numbers 1 through to 9 with no repetition. You don't need to be a genius. These puzzles use logic alone. Watch out! Sudoku is highly addictive.



answer on page 29

Preparation time: 20 minutes
Cooking time: Filling - 3.5-4 hours
 (plus cooling time) Pie - 45 minutes
Serves 4

Steak & Ale Pie

Pie Filling

Lard or dripping (you can use sunflower oil at a push)

700g boneless beef shin – cut into mouth size chunks

25g plain flour, seasoned

200g smoked bacon (diced) or lardons

225g whole baby onions

400ml sweet dark brown ale (Theakston's Old Peculier works well if your ale knowledge is not strong!)

400ml beef stock

1 tsp dried thyme

1 bay leaf

1 tbsp dark muscovado sugar

1 tsp red wine vinegar

1 tsp cocoa or 1-2 squares of very dark (80%+) chocolate

For the pastry:

400g plain flour, plus extra for rolling

1 tsp baking powder

1 tsp mustard powder (optional)

½ tsp salt

175g suet

Iced water

A little milk or egg, to glaze

Method

Preheat the oven to 170C or 150C fan / gas mark 3.

Place the seasoned flour into a large plastic bag. Add the beef in small batches and shake thoroughly to coat evenly. Reserve the floured pieces to a plate. Heat a generous chunk of lard or dripping a large frying pan



over a high heat. Brown the beef pieces in small batches, transferring them to an ovenproof casserole dish as you go.

Reduce the heat a little and add the chopped bacon or lardons and the onions to the pan. Cook until the bacon fat begins to render, and the onions are brown on all sides, then add into the casserole.

Pour a small amount of the beer into the pan and bring to a simmer, scraping the bottom to incorporate all the flavoured meat scraps and flour. Pour this into the casserole too, then pour in the rest of the ale, and add the stock, herbs, sugar, vinegar, and cocoa (or chocolate squares) and bring to a simmer.

Cover, and place into the oven for about 2 hours, then uncover and cook, stirring occasionally, for another 1½ -2 hours (depends on your oven), until the meat is tender. Set on one side to cool then transfer to a pie dish.

To make the pastry place the flour, baking powder and mustard powder in a bowl with ½ tsp salt. Stir in the suet, and then add just enough iced water to bring it together into a dough. Wrap in cling film and refrigerate for an hour or so.

Preheat the oven to 190C / 170C (fan) / Gas mark 5. Roll out the pastry on a floured surface to about 1cm thick. Place over the filled pie dish, sealing the edges tightly. Cut vent slits to allow the steam to escape. Brush with beaten egg or milk and then bake for 45-50 minutes until golden.

Shakespeare Week

March 15th – 21st

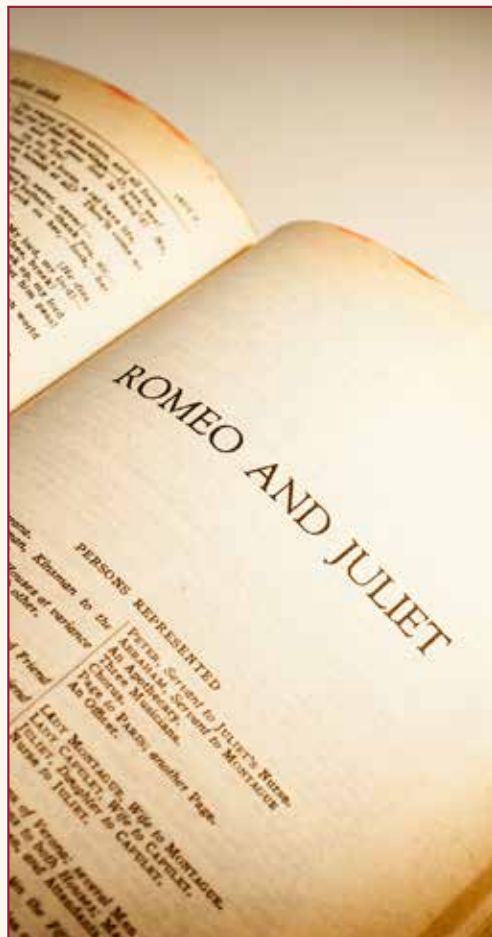
Has your teenager lamented 'WHY do we have to study Shakespeare? It's BORING! Perhaps that was also how you felt when you were in school? In a world of amazing modern writers why do we still teach Shakespeare?

Rich language - Shakespeare loved language and played with it, subverting it, changing nouns into verbs, verbs into adjectives, and connecting words never previously used together, adding prefixes and suffixes, and even inventing completely new words. Scholars estimate that Shakespeare invented at least 1700 of our common modern words. Phrases from his plays have been repeated so often we don't even realise they are Shakespearean in origin: 'heart of gold', 'wild goose chase', 'love is blind'. Our language would be poorer if not for the bard. Few other writers have ever matched the beauty of Shakespeare's language. His soliloquies and monologues are some of the most eloquent ever written.

Complex characters - Shakespeare understood people. His heroes were not cardboard cut outs, but nuanced human beings, capable of the full range of emotions. He also wrote great parts for women (though they would most likely have been played by men in his time).

Themes – Shakespeare's themes as relevant today as they've ever been: love, loss, treachery, honour, tenderness, anger, despair, jealousy, contempt, fear, courage, and wonder. He questions morality, politics, war, wealth, and death.

To read and understand Shakespeare



takes effort. If students can engage with the rich, dense language and syntax of Shakespeare, they can handle other demanding study situations. It sharpens their brains for other modern languages but also the languages of science and maths.

Shakespeare may not be the 'be-all and end-all' (that's one of his) but I hope he continues to be read in schools 'forever and a day'.

Olton & District U3A

5 Years Old, still thriving and open for business



Olton and District branch of the University of the Third Age was formed in March 2016 and we will be celebrating our Fifth Anniversary next month.

Since it was formed the group has gone from strength to strength and now has over 200 members and 31 different interest groups.

The group is open to anyone who has retired or who is semi-retired. The ethos of the u3a is to "Learn, laugh and live". Whilst we love to learn we much prefer to laugh and live and as such we are not an academic institution. Our learning is from other members be it some knowledge of local history, a great recipe, a craft or skill that can be passed on to others, where the best local walks are, or when to prune your clematis.

We welcome everybody regardless of background or ability. We ensure as far as possible that our events are held at times and in

places that will suit everyone including all faiths, ethnic backgrounds or those with a disability.

We are still actively meeting by digital means such as Zoom or WhatsApp but we are now planning for the longed-for time when we will be able to meet each other face to face.

If you have suffered changes in your life including loneliness or retirement forced upon you by economic consequences of the pandemic, or just feel that you would like to join a positive thinking group then Olton and District u3a would love to hear from you. We have reduced our annual subscriptions to £12 for the forthcoming year (April 2021 to March 2022).

If you would like more information or a membership application form it is available on our web site (www.u3asites.org/olton) or you can request one to be posted to you by telephoning 07704486626.



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Councillor surgeries these are face-to-face meetings held by councillors for local people to raise issues in their area. Held at The Core Library, Solihull on the first and last Saturday of the month, 10am – 12 noon.

local police contact for Solihull

Solihull police station

Telephone: 0845 113 5000



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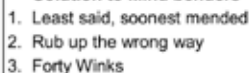
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from page 16

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