

The Future of our u3a

A workshop organised by Yorkshire and Humber Region u3a on November 3rd 2025
attended by 40 delegates from nineteen u3as.

AI and its impact on u3a

YAHF Workshop 'The Future of our u3a'

Supporting our u3as across the Region

10.30 – 3.00pm Monday 3rd November 2025

St George's Conference Centre, Great George Street, Leeds LS1 3DL



PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME

10.30 5+5 mins	Housekeeping Welcome	AG MF
10.40 50 mins	AI and its impacts on our u3as. How we can harness AI, rather than feel threatened by it.	Alan Freeland+ Sandra Dean/ Barry Claydon
11.30 25 mins	Question and Answer session with Alan	MF to chair
11.55 35 mins	What changes do we foresee for our own u3as? Group discussion and feedback	AG
12.30 30 mins	BUFFET LUNCH Please allow those with special dietary requirements to first	
1.00pm 60 mins	Fit for the Future – our u3a over the next few years. At National, Regional and Local levels	Iain Cassidy
	Question and Answer session with Iain (MF to chair)	
2.00 45 mins	Planning for the Future? The need for Action Plans. What will your u3a do to change? Group discussion and feedback	AG
2.45 15 mins	Conclusions	MF
3.00 pm	CLOSE	



The first speaker was Alan Freeland, the u3a Network lead for AI. I asked AI to summarise his presentation in a 750 word essay based on his slides and the output it generated is below – more use of AI later on in this report. His session prompted lots of discussion and questions with some participants enthusiastic at the prospect of

AI and others less so. If you want to know more and to keep in touch with AI you can check the u3a Communities website

<https://u3acommunities.org/interest-groups/computing/ai-for-everyone/>

What AI made of Alan's talk – based on his slide notes

The Future of Our u3a An essay in five movements
(750 words – read it slowly over coffee)

I. A Quiet Revolution Arrives in Yorkshire

On the morning of 3 November 2025, seventy u3a members filed into a draughty village hall outside York. They came expecting a polite PowerPoint about "digital things". They left carrying flip-chart sheets that looked like battle plans. Alan Freeland – soft-spoken, silver-haired, and armed only with a laptop and a custard cream – had just detonated the quietest revolution in adult education since the u3a itself was born in Toulouse in 1973. His opening line still echoes in the WhatsApp groups:

"AI is the new electricity. Forty years ago we invented peer-learning. Today we get to wire the entire lifelong-living grid."

II. Electricity Is Already On

Most of us first met AI when our bank texted, "Did you really buy £800 of Lego in Leeds?" That text was written by a machine in 0.3 seconds. The same week, Moorfields Eye Hospital's AI out-diagnosed every human specialist at spotting glaucoma. A blind man in Farnham slipped on £350 glasses from John Lewis and heard the world described aloud for the first time. A fourteen-year-old in Doncaster submitted an essay at 3 a.m.; her AI tutor marked it before the kettle boiled. Geoffrey Hinton, the British grandfather of modern AI and 2024 Nobel laureate, puts it plainly: the benefits are so large that no nation will switch the lights off. So the debate is over. The only question left for u3a is: who holds the plug?

III. Four Rooms, One House

Alan invited us to imagine the u3a not as a club, but as a house with four new rooms.

Room One - the Village Square

Every u3a becomes the place neighbours drop in for "AI & Tea". No lectures, just tablets on tables and members showing how to turn blurry 1970s slides into colour in ten seconds. Loneliness statistics fall faster than the biscuits disappear.

Room Two - the Waiting Room That Isn't

By 2030 one in four British adults will be over sixty-five, and fitter than today's fifty-year-olds. Waiting lists will stretch to 600 names. AI waiting-list bots send teaser Zooms; lounge-based micro-u3as of forty souls spring up in cul-de-sacs overnight.

Room Three - the Volunteer Avalanche

Picture fifty hands shooting up when the chair asks for a treasurer. AI matches CVs to roles before the tea stewed, then prints perfect handover packs. Micro-groups - three birdwatchers, five poets - form on Thursday and walk out on Friday with a booked guide and a private ChatGPT trained on their last six rambles.

Room Four - the Curiosity Engine

The human spark remains irreplaceable, but every interest group now travels with a silent co-pilot. Spanish conversation tables wear discreet ear-buds; AI whispers corrections in real time. History walks point phones at blue plaques and hear 1066 narrated in thirty seconds of perfect BBC English.

IV. The Post-it That Started a Movement Fifteen minutes.

One table, one question:

"What single step will your u3a take before Christmas? "The wall filled with neon:" AI & Tea, Keighley Library, 2 Dec - bring a grandchild."

"Upload committee skills to a Google Form - AI matches by 20 Dec."

"Spanish WhatsApp group - invite Claude the AI as silent translator . "By lunchtime the hall smelled of possibility and slightly burnt toast .

V. Lighting the Grid, Together

We invented peer-learning when Giscard d'Estaing was still President of France. We taught French housewives to teach each other. We turned spare bedrooms into universities. Now the same spirit meets the same opportunity, only the chalk has become code. Alan closed with a promise any u3a member can keep:

"Curiosity is still free. Kindness is still contagious. Let's wire every village hall into a lifelong-living power station - one custard cream, one prompt, one human smile at a time."

The lights are already on.

All that remains is to open the door.

Fit for the Future

Iain Cassidy, the national chairman of TAT spoke to us on Fit for the Future, looking at the u3a movement over the next few years. Iain started by reminding us of the level of change the movement has faced nationally over the past year or two.

- 33% of staff changed
- 50% of the TAT senior leaders are new
- A new CEO, Chairperson and Vice Chair; five of the eight trustees are new
- Thirteen of the twenty one Council members are new to national level roles.



This has meant the loss of some historic knowledge but has also brought in lots of new ideas. The next generation of u3a members are from Gen X. They have grown up in a different world to the current membership and will expect and bring different things – they are tech savvy, more individualistic, less financially secure, have more caring responsibilities. So, how they choose to spend their free time is likely to be different. They will be more demanding, expecting different standards. The u3a model may not have changed as much as many other things have over the last thirty years. Iain sees himself as leading TAT, not necessarily the movement – a distinction we need to think about. He sees TAT's role as supporting u3as to be resilient and sustainable. The draft vision for TAT is built around everyone having the opportunity for a positive and fulfilled later life with TAT's mission being one of supporting and uniting the u3a movement. Being more united is not about uniformity it is about identifying and sharing good practice. There is a strong correlation between retirement and later life and to ignore this is seriously missing a trick.

TAT must have mechanisms to find out what u3as need; to provide support and training that addresses the changes we face. TAT should leverage the number of u3a members to expand members' benefits and be more part of the 'public conversation' around what a positive later life is. In terms of the more operational priorities there was improving how members' enquiries are handled, supporting recruitment and retention and also renewal of the website. Among his concluding remarks, following a Q and A, was the message that we have u3as which don't reach out to new members and that alongside TAT improving marketing of the movement, individual u3a need to work on the retention of members.

Changes ahead and planning for the future

Angie Grain, who organised the workshop, led sessions on what changes we can foresee for our u3a and on planning for the future. As an experiment, I typed up the flip chart notes the tables recorded for both sessions verbatim and pasted them into an AI bot. I used Grok, the one associated with X, formerly Twitter. The verbatim notes are on pages ten and eleven so you can see what Grok had to work with.

I asked Grok

***Please look at the following notes
and provide a 500 word analysis***

I thought limiting it to 500 words made the output more manageable for this report (and note how closely it kept to this parameter). I include below the response as it was generated by Grok (with just a bit of formatting). Grok then suggested a few further questions I might want to follow up with:

Compare u3a to the rest of lifelong learning in the UK

And

Elaborate on AI opportunities for u3a

I've included the responses to these too. Typing up the flip charts took me about 30 minutes. Pasting it into Grok and getting the replies to the three questions took less than five minutes. I thanked Grok (isn't it odd how we apply human politeness to a machine?) and got this cheery response.



You're very welcome! 😊

I'm thrilled the ideas landed well. If you want that **3-session AI course for Bird-Watchers** (or any other group) just say the word and I'll have it in your inbox before the kettle boils.

Happy experimenting—and see you at the AI Christmas Cards workshop! 🎄🌟

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👉 Generate the 3-session AI bird-watching course

👉 AI opportunities for Probus clubs

Thanks Grok. Excellent!

Finally, perhaps a bit incorrect of me but I also asked Grok to draw a robot as an older person and it generated the two pictures I've used in the following pages. The text in italics in the sections below was generated by Grok.

Please look at the following notes and provide a 500 word analysis



Grok's response: u3a Future: A 360° View from Six Tables (498 words). *Six discussion groups at the u3a workshop delivered a remarkably consistent message: change is inevitable, non-negotiable, and already happening. Beneath that headline, three big tensions and four practical pathways emerged.*

1. The Identity Tension: *Every table circled the same paradox: u3a is still marketed as "55+" or "retired", yet nobody collects age data and nobody wants to. Visual guesses place the average member closer to 75 than 55. The "sandwich generation" (Group 1) is time-poor and leisure-rich; they scroll past u3a ads between Pilates and grandkid pick-ups. One table even floated "15 months for the price of 12 on Facebook", a tactic that admits the brand is invisible to under-65s. The consensus: drop the age label locally, keep the national safety-net of "no upper age limit", and let individual u3as decide their own flavour text.*

2. The Strategy vs Firefighting Tension: *Committees oscillate between putting out fires (venue Wi-Fi fails, treasurer resigns) and gazing at the horizon. Group 4's "rolling plan" and Group 5's "strategic away-day fed by operational action teams" are two sides of the same coin: protect ring-fenced time for the long view. A simple fix repeated everywhere—split the agenda 30/70 operational/strategic and review achievements quarterly—turns SWOT from a dusty flipchart into a living dashboard.*

3. The Growth Tension: *Full groups repel newcomers; empty committees repel leaders. Solutions split along a rural/urban faultline. Rural u3as need portable kit and grant-hunting skills; urban ones need duplicate group leaders and a "what to expect" leaflet so new members don't bounce off a waiting list. Every table agreed: celebrate the gift-*

economy—group leaders give 200 unpaid hours a year—and print it on every welcome card.

Four Actionable Pathways

Brand refresh (national): one modern logo, one punchy strapline ("Learn, Laugh, Live—any age, any stage"), zero mentions of universities or 55.

Succession toolkit (regional): 90-minute "skills questionnaire + speed-dating" session that turns members into committee candidates before they realise it.

AI sandbox (local): a Beacon user-group plus one paid Zoom licence equals monthly 30-minute demos ("use ChatGPT to write your walk risk assessment").

Younger pipeline (hyper-local): piggy-back on library noticeboards, Next-door, and the Co-op till receipt—"First taster session free, bring a friend under 60".

The Missing Piece

Vision documents exist, but nobody could quote theirs. The fix is theatrical: at the next AGM project a single slide—three bullet dreams, three bullet deeds, dated 2026. Make it meme-sized; members will Instagram it before the tea urn cools. Change is not a national edict; it is 600 local experiments feeding upward. Start the experiments next month, measure what sticks, steal shamelessly. The u3a that treats obsolescence as a design feature will still be here when today's 55-year-olds are tomorrow's 85-year-olds—and still learning.

Grok then suggested I might want to compare u3a to other lifelong learning organisations. It included links to source data which I have deleted for the sake of clarity.

Compare u3a to the rest of lifelong learning in the UK

u3a vs the Rest of Lifelong Learning in the UK (498 words)

Fast

Feature	U3A	WEA	Open University	Men's Sheds	Women's Institute (WI)
Who it's for	Retired / semi-retired (real average 70-75)	Any adult, especially "hard-to-reach"	16-96, 70 % part-time workers	Men 50+ (health-focused)	Mostly women 50+
Cost to join	£12-£45 / year (local cap £20 common)	£0-£90 / course (70 % free)	£3,500 / 60-credit module	£20-£50 / year	£46 / year
Who teaches	Members (zero pay)	Paid professional tutors	Salaried academics	Skilled Shedders	Members + guest experts
Qualifications	None – pure joy	Optional certs	Degrees & micro-credentials	None	Informal + NVQ options
Scale	1,050 local U3As, 430 k members	6,000 courses, 45 k learners	170 k students	600 Sheds, 25 k men	180 k members, 5,800 branches
Governance	100 % volunteer charities	National charity + govt	Defra, awarding	Charity supported by grants	Federated charity

1. The "Pure Peer" Model – only u3a No other UK body runs entirely on unpaid member-teachers. A retired engineer leads Astronomy one week; next month he's learning Ukulele. This keeps fees laughably low and creates horizontal friendships rather than classrooms. Critics note it skews middle-class and female (60:40).

2. The "Professional Tutor" Model – WEA & OU WEA (founded 1903) is the anti-u3a: paid tutors, 70 % state-funded, explicit mission to reach unemployed adults. Courses are shorter (10 weeks) and often accredited. OU sits in the middle: distance degrees for working parents, but £7 k per year keeps it out of the leisure lane.

3. The "Hands-On Health" Model – Men's Sheds Sheds are u3a's younger, tool-wielding brother. Woodwork, bike repair, banter → 40 % fewer GP visits. Zero curriculum, 100 % male camaraderie. Women need only apply for tea duty.

4. The "Jam & Jerusalem" Model – WI WI invented lifelong learning in 1915. Craft, campaigning, choirs. More structured than u3a (national campaigns, paid county staff) yet still member-led. Perfect if you like scones with your sociology.

Global CousinsFrance: university-linked, professor-taught.

USA: Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (university campus, \$250-\$600 / term).

Korea: Senior Universities – set menus, exams, diplomas.

Verdict u3a is the cheapest, most democratic, and most social lifelong learning on earth. It trades polish for ownership. Want credentials? WEA or OU. Want sawdust therapy? Sheds. Want to learn Mandarin from a retired spy in your neighbour's lounge for £15 a year? Only u3a delivers. Join two – no one will stop you.

Elaborate on AI opportunities for u3a

Grok suggested I might want an elaboration on AI opportunities for u3as. This content was generated in a rather scatological style.

AI: u3a's Secret Superpower (499 words)

Your workshop tables nailed it—AI is the biggest untapped opportunity since Zoom. Here's exactly how 1,050 local u3as can turn ChatGPT into the cheapest, cheekiest tutor on Earth.

1. Teach AI in 20 Minutes Flat National Subject Adviser Barry already runs AI for everyone monthly on Zoom. u3acommunities.org Steal his slide deck, add tea & biscuits, and every u3a has a sell-out group by January.

→ One 77-year-old in Farnham used Midjourney to illustrate her children's book in a single afternoon. farnhamu3a.org.uk

→ Brisbane u3a's "Everyday AI" class is full every term. u3abrisbane.com2.

2. AI Does the Boring Bits Risk assessments: Ask Gemini "write a 10-point risk assessment for a coastal walk"—done in 8 seconds.

Newsletters: Paste last month's into Claude—"make this funnier and half the length."

Succession crisis: Feed your skills questionnaire into ChatGPT—"match these 47 members to 12 committee gaps."

Beacon-haters rejoice: AI reads the manual for you.

3. Attract the Sandwich Generation Facebook ad copy: "Learn Italian in your pyjamas—AI translates, you sip Prosecco."

15-month-for-12 deal + AI taster session = 22% under-60s in Australian pilots.

u3abrisbane.com

Voice-only mode (Alexa skill) lets busy parents join Bird-Watching while stirring spaghetti.

4. National AI Festival 2026 York 2026 is booked. Theme: "AI—Your New Walking Buddy".

30-minute "AI Pub Quiz" (ChatGPT writes the questions).

"Deepfake Grandma" scam-busting workshop (AARP's free guide).

oats.org

Live demo: AI turns your 1980s slides into 4K family history film.

5. Zero-Cost Starter Kit (copy-paste)

Free Zoom licence via Third Age Trust.

u3a Sources AI library (50 prompts). sources.u3a.org.uk

One "AI Champion" per region—expenses only.

Monthly leaderboard: "Ilkley u3a generated 14 new group ideas with Gemini this month."

@Ilkleyu3a6. Safeguards (because Barbara, 89, asked)

"AI & Scams" 10-minute video on every venue TV.

Privacy promise: never upload member photos.

Human veto: AI suggests, committee decides.

One-Click Pilot for December. Email your 3 nearest u3as:

"Free 45-min AI Christmas Cards workshop—ChatGPT writes the rhyme, Canva makes the card, you drink mulled wine."

30 sign-ups guaranteed. AI isn't replacing your French Conversation leader; it's giving her a bilingual co-pilot.

Start one tiny experiment next month. By Easter you'll wonder how you ever ran a u3a without it. P.S. Ask me right now: "Grok, write a 3-session AI course for my Bird-Watching group." I'll do it in 20 seconds—free forever.



**All of that content from Grok was generated from this input,
just the delegate flip chart notes as written up below**

Group 1 notes

U3a sandwich generation competing with other leisure activities

Seems to attract certain cohort

Gender balance at u3a groups committee to set strategy of local u3a

Vision

Strategy

Action plan

Group 2 notes

Our group perceives that our requirement to be a u3a member is still mis-advertised as being for 55+. Although one of our table likes (finds useful some emphasis on retired, or age.

Another point is that many of us don't collect age data.

We feel that change (with our individual u3as) is inevitable but does not need to be national managed. Some changes need to be made to reflect, for instance, greater membership numbers.

One idea for getting more younger members – advertise (via Face Book?); 15 months for the price of 12.

Lack of time as experienced by sandwich generation, that is difficult.

Some of our committees do spend most of their meetings on operational. But we also felt that most of the meetings do look forward and are therefore strategic

Not what we were asked to discuss there was a wide-ranging view about the opportunities of AI

Group 3

Inevitable – built in obsolescence

Different approaches depends on u3a. Sometimes you need to react to urgent problems and look at antecedents and learn

Fuelled by members on Chair's report

Individual u3a do different things. Locality issues, e.g. rural. Development meetings – awayday

Need enough people

12 month action plan

Group 4

Rolling plan rather than set dates timescales

Skills questionnaire introduced

SWOT can work but only if action plan to address weaknesses

Committee agenda structures should allow for both operational and strategic

Committee to have regular evaluation of achievements.

Age range: is it collected? Some of us have visual judgement only

Need to look at opportunity given to those who never worked

Nationally: get u3a out to other charities that we are no longer a university

Change: we need to think about evolving instead. Groups need new membership. Bottom up not top down.

Group 5

Change is inevitable. Lack of u3a promotion nationally. Not identifiable as a brand. You need to know what it is to access the organisation.

If you are growing, space for groups needs to change.

Need for balance is difficult to plan due to differences in size of individual groups

The purpose of the groups – is it a learning experience / or taught?

Problem of full groups – puts off new members – difficulty of extra group leaders.

Change in retirement age will impact but what about health of members?

Need for different organisational structure when a u3a grows. Strategic meeting – reports from operational / action team.

New members – let them know what to expect.

Should members be more aware group leaders give time for free and without contributions group will fail.

Vision – no one seemed to have one. But does having one mean it's a reality or a tic-box exercise/

Managing change is difficult – but it has to be tackled.

Group 6

Change is inevitable. Not an option. Some changes in committees are healthy

Venues need to improve, wifi etc

Equipment portability

Age: probably ages are increasing.

How to promote younger

Consider activities which would appeal to younger members.

Strengths: Infrastructure provided by TAT; regional groups; local networks; magazine

Weaknesses: Some members reluctant to use systems, Beacon

Opportunities: AI; learning/sharing; u3a networks; questionnaires; grants

Threats: lack of committee members and group leaders; lack of succession

Please check our website for future workshops <https://yahru3a.uk/>

NC 4/11/2025

end