

Good Ideas Forum

A workshop organised by Yorkshire and Humber Region u3a on March 18th 2026 attended by 40 delegates from twenty three u3as.

The workshop was the final of many successful workshops organised by Angie Grain who is stepping down from the role. It also marked the departure of Margaret Fiddes from her leading roles in YAHR u3a. Our Council Reps Pat Collard and Brian Cave paid tribute to both Margaret and Angie on behalf of us all.

The Importance of Interest Groups: Starting new groups, finding leaders, supporting struggling groups etc – Fran Rodway (Sheffield u3a)

Fran acknowledged that every u3a is different and she is speaking from her experience in Sheffield. She has been working on groups development both as part of small team and on her own for eight years. Sheffield has c. 200 groups for c. 3,000 members but there are never enough groups; there are waiting lists.

They have an annual coordinators' meeting and workshop so coordinators can catch up on organisational developments, e.g. policy changes, finance issues etc.

When she had a small team, it was self-sufficient in supporting groups but when there wasn't such a team the wider committee needed to get involved.

Her role involves reviewing current venues for cost, accessibility, suitability etc and researching other venues should they ever be needed. She matches venues to groups and has suggested mergers of groups with overlapping activities when this made sense in terms of viability (numbers and costs) and suitable venues, i.e. dress making + embroidery = sewing in a well-lit venue.

Pubs can often have spaces for free during the day which suit literature groups.

Recognise some coordinators are more self-sufficient than others when it comes to administration and IT and work with them – be flexible.

There are no hard and fast rules around group leaders making their contact details public or relying on generic contact points, it is their choice.

The new member's meeting is a focal point for identifying what new groups might be needed and also potential new coordinators.

Using willing members of an established but full group as seed-corn in starting a new group to adsorb a waiting list.

For larger groups, seek for them to have their own committees.

For struggling groups, use drop in sessions to promote them.

There was a discussion around whether coordinators differ from leaders or convenors and what the nuance of language means to existing and prospective holders of the roles. Thinks about the messages the choice of terms gives out.

There was a discussion around the use of WhatsApp which is not secure in terms of keeping phone numbers confidential (with GDPR implications). Members may feel they are coerced into using WhatsApp for fear of missing out. One sensible suggestion was to ensure that message went out on Beacon (or whatever secure system the u3a has) first, especially if it was for events with limited capacity, and WhatsApp was used for individuals to fine tune their arrangements with like-minded others.

Developing Locally – Pauline Buttling (Barnsley & District u3a)

Pauline took us through a number of initiatives undertaken by Barnsley & District and how the cumulative effect of the process has benefited maybe more than the sum of the parts in raising a profile within the borough which means people get to hear of the u3a in different contexts and it attracts members.

Barnsley & District u3a (Bu3a) was persuaded to apply for the King Charles Award for Voluntary Service. This required a lot of work including getting a former mayor and a current MP to write testimonials and documenting succinctly what the organisation did, what its purpose was etc. Unfortunately the bid was unsuccessful, but it did build a relationship with the former mayor (a current councillor) and the MP. A relationship which wasn't there before.

Barnsley Civic is a newly energised hub for cultural activity and Bu3a was approached by the new CEO to be part of a bid for funding under the Arts Council Creative People and Places initiative. This bid was unsuccessful but Bu3a is now a core partner with other key local stakeholders in The Civic. Along with networking we get good rates for use of the meeting spaces.

In seeking to expand membership in an area of the borough we are under-represented in we found that the local council staff (Ward Alliance staff) had a dim view of the u3a movement and really knew little of what u3a is about. Taking time with them has dispelled this view, may unlock funding but more importantly means u3a is something they are happier to promote as part of their work.

Bu3a were nominated for a 'Pride of Barnsley Award' run by the local newspaper and came third. In the process have built a good relationship with the paper and they regularly ask us for copy.

Lessons

- Find out and challenge any misconceptions other organisations may have of u3a
- Be patient in building networks
- Take opportunities which present themselves
- Be prepared for slow burn
- Bring the committee with you
- Keep members involved / informed

There was a discussion on working with the NHS of research activities where the u3a membership demographic is what they want to target. It was emphasised that a u3a needs to go into this with eyes wide open around the risks of any shared liabilities.

Employing and paying non-u3a experts – Margaret Fiddes (Sherburn & Villages)

Historically u3as were about members of a group sharing knowledge from within the group. However some activities lend themselves to an expert which may lead to the need or desirability of a tutor. The example given was a Weight Loss and Wellness group which involved Yoga – the exercise routines demand trained leadership which the Group members pay for.

Tutors can be paid but the must not be a u3a member – u3a members can not be paid for services (which is different to paying expenses). Tutors must be properly self-employed, be paying tax and have appropriate insurance. It is the responsibility of the u3a's trustees to check and regularly monitor this.

The wider u3a shouldn't subsidise a tutor for a group.

Noncompliance risks the u3a legally becoming an employer with all the attendant responsibilities (and retrospective fines).

The advice of the Third Age Trust aligns with HMRC guidance.

Further advice is available from the Third Age Trust.

Our u3a Club – Phil Green (Howden and District u3a)



The u3aClub idea

- About ½ of the speaker-led plenaries have been replaced by ‘u3aClub’ events
- Think of such an event as being **like a TV Magazine Programme**
- A number of **short, varied items: typically 6 over 2 hours, 10 minutes each**
- 15 minute coffee break halfway.
- Items generated ourselves: **short presentations, interviews, music, comedy**
- **No-one charges a fee**
- The **programme changes from club to club but we have some regular slots now.**
- **‘Something for everyone’**



- Around 300 members, 35 groups, founded around 2010
- Centrepiece: **monthly plenary meeting with a guest speaker.** We use the **Shire Hall**, which is an excellent venue at the heart of the town It's largest concert room will take around 150.
- We used to fill the Shire Hall, but by 2022
 - Attendances fell to around 50
 - Room hire costs were rising
 - Speaker fees were rising
- **Were the monthly Shire Hall talk-based events still viable?**
- A familiar story?





u3aClub: more details

- We **don't charge** entry
- There are 2 hosts (continuity men). The hosts introduce the acts and handle the interviews. *..People like being interviewed!*
- Some items (typically 1 or 2 per club) **come from our interest groups.**
- This is a useful form of **group activity and recruiting**
- u3aClubs started in Nov 23. There have been about **10 so far**
- Our **monthly attendances** have risen significantly and the **perception of the branch has changed positively** .
- *This works for us. Feel free to adopt it and adapt it.*
- *If you do, please get in touch & tell us how it goes.*



Some u3aClub 'Acts'

- Music making groups: recorders, ukuleles
- Local personalities e.g. a butcher,
- Local history e.g. historic pubs, waterloo grave
- Travellers, explorers
- u3a groups: gardening, classis films, MOTO, family history.. :
- Archaeology
- Poets
- Artists
- Someone who collects mermaids..
- **Ambition: putting a u3aClub together and producing it is great fun: could it be an interest group?**



Plenary Session led by Angie Grain

The following ideas were shared by the members present.

- Train coordinators in Beacon (or the system you use) before they take on a group.
- Consider appointing a member of the committee responsible for seeking out and applying for grants.
- Partnerships with the NHS can generate remuneration from the NHS but beware of legal liability.

- Wakefield shared their work in setting up a satellite u3a in a neighbouring town 'Wakefield u3a at Pontefract'.
- In u3a week consider running short courses (e.g. two-hour sessions) as tasters.
- Take the time to have a strategic plan held by the Executive Committee
 - Form subgroups to work on specific elements
- Recruitment: try to get your u3a a page on every local Face Book site
- Take account of your u3a's age profile to ensure continuity.
- Look outside the committee for advisors, for example of harnessing AI.
- Have a buddy system for new members (succession planning).
- Succession planning for group coordinators.
- Get groups to publicise your u3a – for example an Art Group organises an Art Exhibition without Committee needing to be involved.
- Look to outside organisations to support groups e.g. Dronfield's Peaky Wallers, dry stone walling group working with the Peal Park.
- Advertising in libraries and with car stickers.
- Approaching local employers to engage with those about to retire.
- 'Reflections' groups to look at how elements of the u3a are working: the committee, groups, governance and compliance.
- Get to Groups to identify potential committee members
- Ask new members (and existing ones) what their skills are both for group development and committee roles
- Don't be disheartened if a group takes a while to set up: example of a Pétanque Group which has taken four years from conception to starting; a Bob and Boogie Afternoon which aimed too big at first and needs to reconsider its ambitions.
- Think about how the room layout can work for or against what a group wants to achieve.
- Don't forget raffles, getting donated prizes, providing free refreshments at the AGM
- Get members to open their own gardens.
- Think about how a group is described: use words like 'explore' – explore wine tasting.

End

NC 19/3/2026