

Recruitment and Retention

A workshop organised by Yorkshire and Humber Region u3a and The Third Age Trust on July 15th 2026. Sixteen of our u3as were represented.



Left to right: Brian Cave (YAHR u3a & Council Rep), Rosie Shambrook & Nick Linney (Third Age Trust), Pat Collard (YAHR u3a & Council Rep).

The morning session was led by Nick Linney and Rosie Shambrook of the Third Age Trust. It started with a question. Volunteers are critical to the u3a movement, we are a membership organisation, volunteer led but how much do the general membership realise this and recognise the challenge. The challenge is common to most if not all volunteer led organisations in the UK today – the shortage of volunteers.

Where, on the material we produce do we introduce the idea of volunteering? A useful exercise is for current volunteers to reflect on how they got involved and to try to foster those situations among members. Repeatedly making members aware of the need for volunteers is important. It could be that committees are overly protective of their roles, putting out an element of aloofness which can be off putting. A single bad experience can put someone off ever again putting their hand up.

A four step model was put forward.

Step 1: Connect

- Starting at the recruitment stage, acknowledge that people can volunteer and are encouraged to volunteer.
- Host new members' meetings.
- Coffee Mornings & drop ins.
- The individual targeted approach.

The ideas shared included:

- A welcome pack for new members which sets out volunteering opportunities.
- A 'welcome coordinator' who has the role of engaging with new members.
- A skills and interests survey of new members.
- Regular new members' meetings at which all the committee are visible. Consider holding them in different locations.
- Engage members who have been members for a while but haven't really engaged.
- Welcome new members at the monthly meetings.
- Host a lunch for prospective volunteers.
- Drop-ins and coffee mornings.
- How many of our websites promote the u3a as a place which offers volunteering opportunities.
- Market ourselves as a volunteering organisation.
- Treat volunteering and the committee as an interest group for people who like that sort of thing.
- Have a volunteer coordinator to 'talent spot'.

Step 2: Create easier paths

- Establish lists of people interested in helping:
 - STAR group – Small Tasks As Required
 - RUG – Really Useful Group
- Create rotas.
- Share roles.
- Micro tasks (break down tasks into parts different people can do).
- Remove the unknown.
- Nurturing and Shadowing.
- Increase Diversity (e.g. u3a could be a place for non-working parents of school age children to get involved while children are at school).

The ideas shared included:

- Remember that people might be flattered to be asked to be involved.
- Have a volunteer coordinator.
- Note that leadership teams in u3as tend to be banded by age – i.e. many on the committee being of a similar age, meaning many might want to step back at the same time.
- People don't want to be surprised into a role.

- Group coordinators/leaders are a target cohort for committee roles.
- Develop a 'bank' of volunteers of known skills.
- Diversification of tasks.
- Being a trustee and having overly formal committee structures can be seen as bureaucratic and uninviting – address this.

Step 3: Communicate Opportunities

- Share the benefits.
- Regular communications.
- Case studies and stories.
- Simple role profiles.
- Newsletters.
- The nuclear option ("if no one volunteers we close!").

The ideas shared included:

- Keep what you're asking someone to do clear and accurate in terms of the task and the likely duration – people like to know what they are getting in to.
- Drop-ins with a clear purpose stated.
- Separate inward and outward facing Facebook sites. Link your public site to those of other local groups.
- Promote volunteering as a benefit of membership.
- Training for committee roles is available:
 - From The Third Age Trust (online)
 - Local community networks
 - YAHR u3a workshops
- Have an induction pack for new committee members.

Step 4: Celebrate Volunteers

- Saying thank you.
- Raise the profile of volunteers.
- Praise 'unsung' heroes.
- Acknowledge when volunteers move on.
- Join in with national events:
 - Volunteers' Week
 - Trustees' Week
 - u3a Week
- Make sure volunteers know the difference they make.
- Recognition with small gifts is appropriate.
- Volunteers' lunches.
- Get current trustees to say what prompted them to volunteer and what they get out of it.
- Annual garden party for volunteers.
- Consider honorary membership.

Retaining Volunteers

- Induction and peer support.
- Reimburse expenses (this is both fair but also prevents personal economic situation becoming a barrier to getting involved).
- Hold role-specific meetings to share ideas and provide mutual support.
- Keep tasks simple, clear and flexible.
- Recognise people's impact no matter how small.
- Social events for volunteers.
- Promote teamwork.
- Ask volunteers how they are getting on, feeling etc.
- Address niggles promptly.
- Manage conflict early.
- Consult on decisions and take account of feedback.



After lunch there were three presentations from members.

Mo Cave from Sheffield

- Remember few u3as are the same so no one size fits all approach works.
- It is important to have a policy around membership, for example 'slow but consistent growth'; Sheffield grows consistently at about 3% per year.
- Sheffield's model is that the trustees are there to facilitate the organisation not to be a service provider (i.e. if a member wants a particular group its up to them to create it with trustee support).
- Be honest and acknowledge that only certain people will benefit from u3a, we are not a social service.
- Don't underestimate the usefulness of social media – AI for designing posters; <https://pixabay.com/> for royalty-free images.
- It isn't 'members at any price' you need at least 10% of the membership actively volunteering to sustain the organisation and grow.
- There are websites where people who want to volunteer services promote themselves – use them.

Richard Bell from Ilkley & District

Richard told us of an initiative to recruit members from the recently retired.

Friends of Ilkley Rail Station (FOIRS) is a registered charity of volunteers dedicated to the development of Ilkley Rail Station, including as a transport hub. Working with them and the station café, La Stazione, they ran a succession of leafletting blitzes on morning commuters to promote u3a membership. The arrangement included a free coffee at La

Stazione and the leaflet costs were subsidised through FOIRS and Ilkley BID (a local businesses network) to the extent that 5000 leaflets cost the u3a £350. During the month in which this initiative took place they saw twice the normal rate of new members.

Niall Clarke from Barnsley & District

Niall outlined an initiative to recruit members in an area of Barnsley where the u3a has a disproportionately low rate of membership.

Official data was studied to understand the area factually rather than relying on received opinions. A sub-committee developed a formal plan with activities and due dates with one member in overall charge; utilising the project management skills of individuals on the committee.

- Structured plan
- Dedicated officer to run it
- Analysis of data
- Engage with Ward Alliances and others who run stuff and know the area professionally
- Drop In and pop ups
- Find a venue with enthusiastic staff to work with not just rent from
- Set up the groups people want

From a membership of around five in the area in the ten years up to the start of the initiative in early 2026, membership now stands at 57.

Pat Collard wound up the event, thanking the speakers and delegates. She reminded everyone a key thing to remember is to target effort to what is relevant to the situation you're addressing. She also pointed to grants available for event aimed at attracting members <https://www.u3a.org.uk/grants-for-u3as> and suggested that YAHHR u3a could support activities involving several u3as in a joint initiative.

end

