



# Interest Groups Matter

## Category: Interest Groups

### Purpose

To provide advice and support about interest groups to interest Groups Coordinators and other committee members who may want to know more about interest groups. This document can also be used as a template to create a handbook to share with Groups Coordinators and Committee members.

### Scope

Relevant to all u3as.

### Groups Coordinator Role

The member responsible for facilitating the initiation of new interest groups and supporting existing interest groups and their convenors. Most Groups Coordinators are committee members. They will:

- Facilitate the setting up of new interest groups including the recruitment of new Group Convenors/Leaders (an individual u3a member or group of members who run a group).
- Support existing groups
- Support and advise the Group Convenors/Leaders.
- Ensure good communication between the Group Convenors/Leaders, the group members, the Committee and the u3a as a whole.

For further details please refer to the [Groups Coordinator role description](#) on the u3a website (this template can be adapted for the needs of your u3a).

### Introduction to interest groups

It is often said that interest groups are the life blood of the u3a, and each group will develop its own structure. However, it is important that Group Convenors/Leaders, groups and members follow the u3a ethos of shared, participative and self-help learning – the teachers learn, and the learners teach. The result will not only be an increase in knowledge, but a supportive and friendly atmosphere which enables everyone to participate.

### u3a principles

The u3a ethos is based on three principles which are a corner stone for the interest groups and participation from members in support of the groups they are involved in.

### The Third Age Principle:

- Membership of a u3a is open to all in their third age.
- Members promote the values of lifelong learning and the positive attributes of belonging to a u3a.
- Members should do all they can to ensure that people wanting to join a u3a can do so.

### The Self-Help Learning principle:

- Members form interest groups covering as wide a range of topics and activities as they desire.
- Learning is by the members, for the members.
- No qualifications are sought or offered. Learning is for its own sake, with enjoyment being the prime motive, not qualifications or awards.
- There is no distinction between the learners and the teachers. They are all u3a members.

### The Mutual Aid principle:

- Each u3a is a mutual aid organisation, operationally independent but a member of the Third Age Trust, which requires adherence to the u3a movement.
- No payments are made to members for services to any u3a.
- Each u3a is self-funded with membership subscriptions kept as low as possible.
- Outside financial assistance should only be sought if it does not imperil the integrity of the u3a.

## Guidance for Groups Coordinators – Setting up a new Group

Starting a group will involve meeting with the new Group Convenor(s)/Leader(s) and helping them set up the new group. Some of the support and guidance provided may include information or suggestions about venues, content of the group, data protection, safety and risk in order to ensure the group is successful. Further support specifically for Group Convenors/Leaders can be found in the Group Convenors/Leaders Handbook, available to download from the [u3a website](#).

For any new group, these are the recommended steps to undertake:

- Agree the development of the new group with the u3a Committee.
- Ensure that the new group is developing an added value to your current groups offer.
- Advertise and promote new groups.
- Support the Group Convenors/Leaders in arranging venues (if required).
- Signpost the Group Convenor/Leader to the support offered from the u3a office [Learning Team](#), such as Subject Networks and [Subject Advisers](#) who can support with ideas for the development of the group. (There is a list of Subject Advisers and their contact details on the [u3a website](#).)

- Consider whether there are any risks that might occur as a result of the group's activities. You can download the [risk assessment checklist](#) to help you identify any, and if you're unsure or want further advice to speak with your committee or contact the [u3a Office](#).
- Organise initial meetings and agree on period of initial support for the establishment of the group.

### Supporting an existing group

Once a group has been set up the Group Convenor/Leader may require regular support. They may face challenges, such as members having to wait to join if there are too many members, not enough members in the group, struggling to rejuvenate a group, running group meetings online or knowledge of policies and procedures.

The relationship between the Groups Coordinator and Group Convenors/Leaders is vital to the success of groups in any u3a. Good communication is key to the success and it is recommended that a mixture of forms of communication is utilised. Such as:

- Providing regular feedback with Group Convenors/Leaders, this may be a combination of emails and online meetings.
- Facilitation of networking and sharing information between Group Convenors/Leaders. This might be a Group Convenors/Leaders coffee morning and or lunch gathering.
- Providing induction and training to new Group Convenors/Leaders and support throughout their time in the role.

### Networking

It is important that Groups Coordinators and Group Convenors/Leaders do not feel isolated in their role and networking with other u3as and other Groups Coordinators is an important aspect of both roles. This may be networking within your u3a, joining with neighbouring u3as, joining a wider network or a peer support group. Peer support groups are groups of u3a members who have the same responsibility/role as others and may be formed across a network, Region or nationally. There may already be an appropriate peer support group in your area you could join, or if you are looking to set one up there is further information in the [Peer Support Groups Guidance](#) document on the u3a website.

There are also likely to be [u3a networks](#) in your area. These are informal groupings of u3as usually local to each other where representatives from each u3a meet to share ideas, events, speakers, training sessions, discuss issues and support each other. For further information please contact your [Regional Trustee](#) or have a look at the [networks webpage](#).



## Recruitment of Group Convenors/Leaders

As a Groups Coordinator the recruitment of volunteers is always on the committee agenda. There are resources on the u3a website that provide information about recruiting new Group Convenors/Leaders, such as the document [Recruiting and Valuing Volunteers](#) and in the [Recruitment and Retention Toolkit](#). There are also online [workshops](#) that cover this topic and can be booked on the [u3a website](#).

## Partnerships

u3a groups maybe approached by other organisations in your local area, or a group may be interested in establishing a partnership with a local or national organisation. For guidance on setting up and agreeing partnerships, please refer to the [u3a Partnership Guidance Checklist](#).

## Keeping it Legal

### Policies and procedures

Groups Coordinators, Group Convenors/Leaders and committee members need to be aware of the support, guidance and advice available to run your u3a, lead interest groups, and Groups Coordinators should be responsible for communicating and updating Group Convenors/Leaders about the importance of adherence to the guidance and any relevant updates. These areas include:

- Finance
- Data Protection
- Safeguarding policy and procedures
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- Accessibility
- Complaints and disciplinary procedures
- Incident reporting

Information about these areas is available in the [Support for u3as](#) section of the u3a website. Please note, you will need to set up a log in to access this page if you haven't already done so.

## Health and Safety

- All accidents and incidents must be reported to your committee as soon as possible and it is important to have an accurate record in case of any future problems. To help record and report any accidents or incidents, please use the [Incident Report form template](#).
- A risk assessment checklist must be carried out for all group activities and a number of different risk assessment templates are available on the [u3a website](#).



- The Third Age Trust provides insurance for group activities, and although personal accident insurance cover is not provided by the Third Age Trust, the insurance does cover all u3a members. Further details can be found on the [u3a website](#).

### Problem solving

Sometimes issues can arise within a group that disrupt the smooth running and can spoil the enjoyment for everyone. Don't leave a problem too long before trying to resolve it. Talk to your Chair or other members of the committee if you are unsure how to resolve the problem or just want someone to explore options with. You can also contact the [u3a Office](#) if you want to talk something through or check your understanding of a policy/procedure.

### Issues between group members

A Group Convenor/Leader may approach a Groups Coordinator for support in a resolution between members. If a situation does not resolve and becomes acrimonious your committee is there for further for consultation. Follow the advice contained within your u3a disciplinary and complaints policy and procedure. There is a template policy available on the [u3a website](#) if your u3a does not have one.

### Promotion of groups

Raising the profile of your u3a's groups by sharing information, updates and news with existing members and the local community is a great way to keep members up to date with what is happening, encourage members to join new groups and to attract new u3a members. Some of the ways this can be achieved is by:

- Keeping information about your groups up to date on local websites
- Use of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram)
- Sharing information in your u3a newsletter
- Sending contributions to be included in the [national u3a newsletter](#) or Third Age Matters magazine ([communications@u3a.org.uk](mailto:communications@u3a.org.uk))
- Getting in touch with your Region/Nation PR Adviser. If you aren't sure who they are, please contact your [Regional Trustee](#).
- At Regional, network or local events.

### Advice and support

- [Your Regional Trustee](#) will provide an overview of activity across your Region and will also be able to provide support/answer questions or direct to you someone who can help.
- [The u3a office](#) can be contacted by any member if you have questions or concerns. Email: [u3a.office@u3a.org.uk](mailto:u3a.office@u3a.org.uk) or telephone: 020 8466 6139
- The [u3a website](#), in particular the support for u3as section



- u3a **online workshops** are informal and informative and provide a great opportunity to meet and exchange ideas, share best practice and learn with other members from across the UK. Details about the topics and how to book can be found on the [u3a website](#).

### Networking and staying informed

- [Networks, regions and neighbouring u3as](#) allow members to draw on experience from within the movement.
- [u3a newsletter](#) is a monthly e-newsletter, which any member can sign up to via the u3a website.

### Learning Resources

- **Subject Advisers** are Trust Volunteers with specialist knowledge in a wide range of topics. Their contact details are available on the [u3a website](#) and in the Third Age Matters magazine. Subject Advisers can provide advice on both setting up a group in their subject area and the sustainability of ones already in existence, which may benefit from new ideas or a different approach.
- [u3a Subject networks](#) provide a platform for u3a members to connect and come together around their interests.
- [National u3a learning programmes](#) showcase a wide range of learning activities online for members to get involved in.
- External organisations such as museums, libraries, schools, universities.

### Related documentation

All of the below documents can be access on the [Support for u3as webpage](#)

- Growth Matters
- Group Convenor/Leader Handbook
- Finance Matters and Finance FAQs
- Risk assessment templates
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion sample policy
- Data Protection Policy template
- Accessibility Sample Policy (England, Scotland and Wales)
- Insurance FAQs

u3a Handbook for Group Coordinators (The Third Age Trust)			
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