

The title 'Group Convenor/Leader' are the norm in our u3a, however, members who help to set up and run interest groups are known by many names. You might be a Group Facilitator, Manager or Organiser.

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1. Getting Started

Thinking of starting a new group? That's fantastic – thank you! Here's how to get going in a way that sets your group up for success.

- **Talk It through**
 - Start by having a chat with the Groups Co-ordinator about your idea. They can offer advice, help you shape your plans, and suggest possible venues or contacts.
- **Define Your Group's Purpose**
 - Have a clear idea of what the group is about – what will members learn, do, or enjoy together?
 - Your aims can evolve over time, especially as members contribute their ideas, but having a starting point helps everyone understand what to expect.
- **Choose a Name.**
 - Pick a name that is simple, friendly, and self-explanatory. It helps potential members quickly see what the group is about.
- **Think About a Venue**
 - You don't need to have a venue booked – but think ahead:
 - Will you meet in someone's home or a hired space?
 - What size will the group likely be?
 - Are there access or parking considerations?
 - Do you need any equipment (e.g. projector, tables, hearing loop)?
 - The Groups Co-ordinator can help you find a venue and advise on costs, availability, and facilities.

- **Decide How Often to Meet**
 - Most groups meet monthly or fortnightly, but you can choose what works best. Also decide:
 - How long each session should last (usually 1½ to 2 hours)
 - Whether you'll include a refreshment break
- **Promote Your Group**
 - Once your plan is ready, the Groups Co-ordinator will help spread the word:
 - Via the u3a website and newsletters
 - Through group-wide emails using Beacon
 - At monthly meetings or through informal word of mouth

2. Running your sessions

Every group is different, but the principles below can help you create welcoming, purposeful and enjoyable sessions that encourage participation and shared learning.

- **Start Well: Your First Meeting**
At the first session, invite group members to:
 - Introduce themselves and share what they hope to gain from the group
 - Discuss ideas for future topics, formats, or outings
- **Suggest ways they'd like to be involved**
 - Also check that the venue works well for everyone — consider space, comfort, access, and facilities
- **Set Group Agreements Together**
 - Establishing a few shared ground rules at the start helps everyone feel safe and respected.
- **You might suggest:**
 - Be on time and come prepared
 - Listen when others are speaking
 - Give everyone a turn – no one dominates, and no one is left out
 - Respect different views – we can disagree kindly
 - Be encouraging, especially towards new or less confident members
 - Mistakes are part of learning – every contribution matters
- **Keep It Varied**
Make sessions engaging by using a mix of formats. Depending on your group, this might include:
 - Talks or presentations
 - Discussions
 - Quizzes or games
 - Outings or guest visitors
 - Shared reading or watching a short video clip
 - Always have a back-up plan in case something doesn't go to plan!
- **Share the Load**
You don't have to do everything yourself. Inviting members to take on small roles can build ownership and keep energy high. Roles might include:
 - Keeping the attendance register
 - Collecting contributions or venue fees
 - Making the tea or welcoming newcomers
 - Leading a short activity or arranging a guest speaker

3. Inclusivity, Engagement & Respect

Our u3a values community, learning and friendship for all. As a Group Leader, you play a key role in helping everyone feel welcome and included.

- **Make Newcomers Feel Welcome**
 - A warm welcome sets the tone. When a new member joins:
 - Greet them personally and introduce them to others
 - Explain how the group works and what to expect
 - Show them around the venue, including the facilities and fire exits
- **Check for Accessibility**
 - Be mindful of physical and sensory needs. Think about:
 - Step-free access, ramps, or nearby parking
 - Good lighting and clear signage
 - Hearing loops or quieter venues for those with hearing difficulties
 - Comfortable seating and room layout
- **Encourage Participation**

Some members are naturally confident, while others may be quieter. You can:

 - Ask quieter members questions directly (in a kind, non-pressuring way)
 - Offer small group or pair discussions before whole-group sharing
 - Gently manage dominant speakers to ensure everyone has space
- **Foster Courtesy and Respect**

You may occasionally need to remind members of group expectations. This might include:

 - Keeping phones on silent
 - Avoiding side conversations or interrupting
 - Respecting differences of opinion
- **Keep It Enjoyable**

Groups thrive when members feel encouraged. Try to:

 - Praise small steps and shared efforts
 - Celebrate achievements, birthdays, or milestones
 - Keep the mood light and positive – learning should be fun!

4. Handling Challenges

Even the most successful groups encounter occasional bumps in the road. The key is to respond calmly and with care, remembering you're not alone — support is always available.

- **Managing Conflict**

Disagreements may arise from time to time. If tensions develop between members:

 - Step in privately, not in front of the group
 - Listen to both sides respectfully and seek a compromise
 - Remind members of the group's ground rules if needed
 - If you're unable to resolve the situation, speak to a committee member or the Groups Co-ordinator for advice
- **Responding to Low Attendance**

Fluctuations in attendance are perfectly normal, but if numbers remain consistently low:

 - Ask for feedback — is the time, day, or venue convenient?
 - Are the sessions meeting members' needs and expectations?
 - Would a different format or activity help re-energise the group?

- **Avoiding Burnout**

Group Leaders give generously of their time, but it shouldn't become a burden. If you're feeling stretched:

- Ask others to share responsibilities
- Consider rotating leadership or having a co-leader
- Talk to the Groups Co-ordinator for support – you are never expected to manage alone

5. Communication and Digital Tools

Staying in touch with your group is vital – whether to share updates, check attendance, or send reminders. There are several ways to do this, both digital and traditional.

- **Beacon (u3a Membership System)**

Beacon is the online membership system used by Stowmarket u3a. Through Beacon, Group Leaders can:

- Access their group membership list
- Send secure group emails (without revealing personal email addresses)
- View basic finance records related to the group

- **To use Beacon:**

- You'll need access from the Beacon Administrator (currently the Treasurer)
- They can provide login details and offer simple training or support.

- **Email**

Group-wide emails are an efficient way to:

- Share upcoming meeting reminders
- Distribute handouts or links
- Send apologies or changes to plans
- Always use blind copy (bcc) if you're sending emails manually.

- **WhatsApp**

Some groups find WhatsApp a quick and informal way to:

- Share reminders or meeting updates
- Arrange lifts or car shares
- Keep in contact between meetings

- **Facebook**

Many groups set up a private Facebook group for members to share photos, links or updates. Always ask permission before posting photos.

- **Zoom, Teams, Jit.si and Video Calls**

Sometimes it's helpful to meet online – especially if a member is housebound or has moved away. Before using these tools:

- Check if members are comfortable using them
- Offer a short practice session if needed

- **Don't Forget Non-Digital Options**

Some members do not use email or mobile phones. Be sure to:

- Offer printed reminders
- Make occasional phone calls
- Ensure all members feel included

6. Managing Group Finances

Handling money doesn't need to be complicated — and you're never expected to manage it alone. The u3a Treasurer is always available to support you.

- **Taking Payments**

If your group collects money (for venue hire, refreshments, outings, etc.), the preferred method is Bank Transfer. It's secure, easy to track, and avoids the need to handle cash.

- Ask the Treasurer for the correct u3a bank details and how to reference payments
- Remind members to include a clear reference when making a transfer

- **Accepting Cash (When Needed)**

Some members may prefer to pay in cash. In this case:

- Always give a receipt (receipt books are available if needed)
- Never use your own personal bank account for u3a funds
- Hand cash to the Treasurer as soon as possible, or use a u3a paying-in slip

- **Keeping Track**

You don't need to manage a full budget, but it is good practice to:

- Keep a brief record of group income and spending
- Check that contributions cover costs
- Speak to the Treasurer if you're unsure about anything

7. Health & Safety

While u3a activities are usually low-risk, it's still important to create a safe environment for all members. A few simple steps can help keep everyone comfortable and protected.

- **General Good Practice**

If you're meeting in a public venue such as a hall, pub or library, most health and safety matters will be covered by the venue's own Risk Assessment.

Even so, it's good practice to:

- Arrive a few minutes early and check the room layout
- Ensure chairs are stacked safely and there are no trailing wires
- Know where the fire exits and toilets are
- Make sure the space is accessible to all

- **Meeting in Homes**

If your group meets in a member's home, a brief Risk Assessment is recommended — your Groups Co-ordinator can provide a simple checklist.

- **Outings and Walks**

For walks or trips, a separate Risk Assessment should be completed in advance. Forms are available from the Groups Co-ordinator (or see below).

- **Accidents and Reporting**

If an accident or incident occurs:

- Ensure the person is safe and supported
- Inform the Groups Co-ordinator
- Complete the appropriate accident report form
- All incidents are reviewed by the committee to identify follow-up steps.

- **Related Documents**

All the following are available on the 'Links' page of the website,

www.u3astowmarket.org.uk/links/

Health & Safety Policy, Incident/Accident Report Form, Risk Assessment – Venue and Risk Assessment – Trips and events

8. Useful Contacts and Support

You're never alone as a Group Leader — there's always someone to turn to for advice, help or a friendly chat when things feel uncertain.

- **Groups Co-ordinator**

Your first point of contact for anything related to group organisation. They can help with starting a group, venues, advertising, resolving issues, and providing forms or guidance.

groupscoord@u3astowmarket.org.uk

- **Treasurer**

Responsible for u3a finances and Beacon access. They support bank transfers, receipt books, and general finance queries.

treasurer@u3astowmarket.org.uk

- **Chair or Committee Members**

Available for general support, governance queries, and pastoral concerns. They offer advice and perspective when needed.

chair@u3astowmarket.org.uk

- **Stowmarket u3a Website**

In addition to the above, visit the website to find much more such as full committee listing, upcoming speaker programme and events, group listings and plenty of archive information.

www.u3astowmarket.org.uk

- **Beacon Support**

Once registered, you can use Beacon to email your group, access member details securely, and view finances. Training and support are available.

9. Final Thoughts and Thank You

Thank you for stepping forward as a Group Leader — you're playing a vital role in keeping Stowmarket u3a vibrant, welcoming, and full of opportunity for others.

Groups are the heart of u3a life. They offer not just learning and shared interests, but connection, laughter, and a sense of belonging. As a Group Leader, you're helping others discover new ideas, build friendships, and continue growing — all in an inclusive, low-pressure environment.

- **Remember:**

- You are never alone — support is always available
- You don't need to do everything — share the load
- Mistakes are part of the process — and entirely okay
- It's okay to step back or ask for help
- Your group doesn't need to be perfect — just welcoming, respectful, and enjoyable.

We hope this handbook has given you practical guidance and reassurance. If there's anything more you need, please ask.

Enjoy leading your group — and thank you for making a difference!