

How to guide: Bigger and better committees

Introduction

The pandemic has been very demanding of u3a committees. Committees are having to learn new skills, *and* grapple with a rapidly changing context of lockdowns and social distancing, *and* keep their u3a going, *and* plan for reopening and recruiting, *and* do some old things differently *and* some entirely new things.

For many u3as all this comes at a time when the committee may be at a low ebb – tired by sustaining their u3a in the face of covid disruptions; possibly facing the loss of committee members at the end of their tenure. And this is happening in the context of an historic difficulty in recruiting committee members – not just in u3as but in the voluntary sector generally.

This guide is about making your committee *Bigger and Better*. It is based firmly on the practical experiences of over 20 u3as which have developed and implemented these strategies. It is not however, intended to provide an exhaustive set of commandments. Rather, it seeks to provide a summary of effective practice, some of which may be relevant to your u3a. The guide is organised in 4 sections:

- Three general principles
- Dealing with a crisis
- Medium term strategies
- Longer term strategies

We would be very grateful for your feedback about this guide and we seek to learn from your experiences of welcoming new members online. Please keep a note of your suggestions for improvement and send them to feedback@u3a.org.uk

Three general principles

Whether you are in a crisis mode or not, there are 3 very general principles which seem to underpin successful strategies to recruit bigger and better committees:

- Sell the benefits
- Don't sell negatives
- Let the light in

All too often, appeals for new committee members are made in the most negative terms, along the lines of 'it's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it'. This seems to be quite a widespread view. In the words of one Regional Trustee: 'The chairs that I speak to mostly say they were coerced or tricked into doing it for a short time, and then they were stuck with it. Usually few members will come forward unless the situation is critical and closure

threatens, and most are frightened of the perceived risks and responsibilities. A quote from my conference last week “I’ve worked all my life. I don’t want to start taking on responsibility now – I just want to enjoy my retirement”.’

A moment’s thought suggests that there are lots of potential benefits to being a committee member. Getting current (and past) committee members to say what they got out of being on the committee can help to identify and sell these benefits. In no particular order of priority, benefits include:

- Working with others in a rewarding and shared endeavour. Growing your u3a as part of a team effort – what could be more satisfying?
- Developing new skills including technical skills such as chairing meetings, public speaking, mentoring, marketing, social media, on line meetings. Better still, developing your skills further if you already have them.
- Making and deepening friendships.
- A sense of achievement from helping your u3a go to the next stage
- Fun and enjoyment(!) It might seem odd to suggest that being on the committee can be fun, but the steps outlined in the rest of this guide should help to make your committee enjoyable as well as being effective.

The third general principle is to *let the light shine in*. If you don’t, your members may have all sorts of misconceptions about what you are doing and what is involved in being on the committee. Indeed, many of your members may not have had particularly satisfying experiences of meetings and committees while they were working or in other voluntary capacities. The best way of dispelling the myths that committees are all dullness and routine is by letting your members see what you are actually doing.

u3as have adopted a number of different ways of doing this including regular ‘Ask the Committee’ sessions at general meetings, personal accounts from committee members in newsletters, and, inviting member to observe committee meetings. Matlock Area u3a, for example, has introduced a number of measures to let in the light, including:

- Observers at a Committee Meeting
- Shadowing Committee and Group Coordinators
- Afternoon tea with newly elected Committee members
- Virtual meeting with new members - part of which will be explaining the roles within the Committee
- Reviewing the website 'Committee Area' and making this available in the public area
- Updating all Committee Roles and making them available on the website in the public area.

Dronfield u3a regularly invites members to attend committee meetings as observers, whether they are intending to become a trustee or not. These visits are followed up individually. In the words of the u3a: ‘We have a regular turnover of committee members

with usually 2 or 3 replacements each year – this keeps us on our toes and maintains continuity.’

Lancaster and Morecombe u3a introduced a "find out about your u3a" meeting 3 months prior to their AGM:

We publicised this widely and were able to personally invite members as well. We had around 12 non-committee members attend the meeting, where we discussed how the u3a was structured, how decisions were made, etc. We looked at hypothetical questions the committee might be asked to decide and deduced which u3a principles were involved in making the decision as well as other possible issues like money, constitution, data protection, etc. It was face to face over coffee and biscuits. Anyone who was then interested in visiting a committee meeting was invited to attend. About half attended and several subsequently joined the committee. Mary Waters, Lancaster and Morecombe u3a

Dealing with a crisis

The whole point of this guide is to avoid crisis situations in your committee. But if you are facing a crisis – committee officers reaching the end of their tenure and no replacements in sight, or a sudden and unexpected loss of key committee members – you may well be in crisis mode.

The most widespread way of dealing with such a crisis seems to be the nuclear option: ‘*Either people step forward or our u3a will cease to exist!*’ As a strategy, this won’t necessarily recruit the best committee members, but it seems to be pretty successful in helping u3as to continue.

There are some alternatives, however. Ware u3a successfully recruited to its committee by challenging male members to step up and help address the gender imbalance in its committee:

Over the past years the committee and vast number of group leaders were women. When the previous chair stood down having completed her 3 years, no-one came forward despite lots of pleas, then threats to close. A previous chairman then challenged male members to play their part. This prompted some newer members to think hard about their role and a number came forward. This has revitalised the committee, not only in more balance of male/female but ages and different ideas. Somehow this change has also helped the others in the committee to be bolder. Jan Wing, Chair, Ware u3a

Plymouth u3a, experimented by creating a video to address the sudden and unexpected loss of four committee members:

As we were in lockdown the only option was to film a recording of myself (with my chairman’s hat on) making a plea to the membership and telling people of our concerns, advising that we badly needed volunteers to step up and help. I am

pleased to say this idea has received a lot of support - and resulted in some volunteers coming forward! The video had over 1000 hits because many people seemed to watch it twice. Marilyn Lean, Chairman, Plymouth u3a.

Perhaps the most difficult situation is where a crisis is linked to longer term issues in the committee. One u3a was in imminent danger of closure due to a lack of committee members. Help was obtained by reporting the matter at the local network meeting where an experienced member from another u3a offered to chair for a year. The outsider with fresh ideas was duly elected at the AGM and was able to troubleshoot. As a result, the u3a was re-vitalised, had a 40% increase in membership and prospective new committee members came forward to stand for election, when the chair completed their year of office.

Medium term strategies

A number of u3as have developed highly effective committee strategies for the medium term. Although there is some overlap the approaches seem to fall within three broad categories:

- Personal approaches to individual members
- Developmental opportunities
- Sharing roles and tasks.

Personal approaches to individual members

There seems to be a pretty wide consensus that personal approaches to individual members are much more effective than generalised appeals in newsletters or at general meetings:

'The personal approach to members to join committee works best - we've had three new members for our committee' (Penicuik); headhunt new members and approach them directly (Wellingborough); recruit potential committee members through personal contact rather than asking for new committee members at the general meeting (Beeston); a direct approach to recruiting prospective committee members works best (Glenfield).

Developmental opportunities

Some u3as have created developmental opportunities, partly to be able to offer support to new committee members, partly to make the task less daunting, and partly to enable new committee members to grow into the role. This can take a number of forms including:

- Shadowing committee roles (Radlett; Waltham Abbey)
- Observers at committee meetings (Eastwood)
- Apprentice or assistant roles (East Suffolk)
- Co-options without a specific role (to begin with) (Beeston)

- Involvement of members in task groups and sub-committees (which can lead on to full committee roles) (Ilkley, Matlock, Benfleet)

Apart from spreading the load and generating extra energy, the involvement of the wider membership can be a stepping stone to a committee role:

As the workload grows and the organisation becomes more complex, we have recruited helpers who are not committee members. We find that this involves many of our members in work which enables us to flourish without becoming a burden. It also stimulates the development of new ideas. Mike Brigden, Chair, Caterham u3a

Sharing roles and tasks

The most structural medium term solution to committee strengthening is to adopt a systematic approach to team working in different committee roles and tasks. This has the potential advantages of increasing the energy and person power available, making roles less daunting and more attractive, and enabling effective succession planning. In the words of East Suffolk u3a:

We do face some challenges including attracting members to undertake Committee roles. A large membership has some pros and cons. While the number of members presents a good sized pool from which to attract people to important roles running our u3a it also means that the workload on individuals can be excessive and so deter volunteers. We have resolved this problem by adopting a team approach in recent years. We have found that members are much more likely to volunteer for roles if they are shared roles or part of a team.

So for some Committee roles we have a team of 4 with one person as the Committee member which allows a sharing of workload but ensures the Committee has a member with responsibility for the role. In others we have established an assistant model which also has the benefit of developing individuals to take over the main role in due course. We have also found that at group leader and campus coordinator level the shared approach works extremely well. Christine Dobson, Chair, East Suffolk u3a

Lancaster and Morecombe has preferred to develop the role of sub-committees to relieve the load on Committee members and deliver vital developmental tasks:

These sub-committees each have a committee member as link and each has a specific remit, but then acts within that remit and report monthly (usually) to the committee. These sub-committees take on a lot of the responsibilities of the committee members. As a result of the efforts of our sub-committees, we have two meetings every month with a wide range of speakers, a new updated website, a Facebook page, a YouTube publicity video, and we have recently updated the manner in which members can both join and renew, including the use of on-line

joining using PayPal. The reopening sub-committee is responsible for reopening and new groups. Mary Waters, Lancaster and Morecombe u3a

Longer term strategies

Longer term strategies developed by u3as seem to fall into 4 main groups:

- Making your committee bigger
- Starting as you mean to carry on
- Responding to new/different ideas
- Nurturing the team and having some fun.

Making you committee bigger

This might seem rather optimistic, given that many u3as are experiencing difficulties filling officer, let alone committee, roles. But you know it makes sense! The bigger your committee (within reason) the more hands, ideas, energy and enthusiasm you will have at your disposal. Size does indeed matter. All you need to do is figure out how to get bigger.

If you adopt strategies developed by u3as and summarised in this guide, in the longer term, you should be able not only to fill your vacancies but also to grow the size of your committee to the limit allowed by your constitution.

If you adopt the strategy of team approaches and/or a wide deployment of sub committees and task groups, there is virtually no limit to the amount of people you can have to help you deliver your committee roles and tasks. Among the u3as which have taken part on the Pathfinder recruitment project, Ilkley, Matlock, Leyland and Benfleet all formed task or working groups to work on their website, recruitment plan and new ideas to develop their u3a.

Starting as you mean to carry on

Anecdotally, one of the great benefits of recruiting new u3a members is that you may be recruiting future interest group leaders and facilitators and indeed future committee members. Turning this precept into action (and in the middle of the pandemic), the new chair of Plymouth u3a contacted all members who joined the u3a in the past 9 month or so and asked them what their first impressions were and how they felt the u3a could improve things. Responses were very positive and as a result two people agreed to join with three members of the committee to form a 'recruitment sub-committee'.

Bristol u3a developed an online meeting for new members with inputs covering u3a principles, interest groups and how to run them, and how Bristol u3a is organised and dealing with the context of covid. There were three rounds of small group discussion in break out rooms on experiences of the u3a so far, ideas for new interest groups and ideas on meeting and overcoming challenges. As a result, two participants offered to join the committee, another is playing a key role in the Strategy team and another has plans to set

up a new group looking at Social Integration - the realities of living in the UK as a non-white British person.

Responding positively to new/different ideas

This may sound like stating the obvious, but surprisingly some committees - even committees which are very effective in other respects – are losing recently recruited new committee members (and in one case a new chairman). On two occasions known personally, committee members and a chairman have resigned because of frustration that the ideas which they have brought to the committee have been neither welcomed or nor supported.

Not every new idea may be a good one, but this does suggest that if you want to harness and benefit from the energy and enthusiasm of new committee member, you may need to move a bit out of your comfort zone and/or be willing so do things differently.

Nurturing the team and having some fun

We all need to feel that our efforts are recognised and valued. We all need to nurture the people side of committees, as well as delivering on key roles and tasks. We all need to have a bit of fun - it's in our u3a strapline!

Before Covid, I surveyed a number of u3as. These were all u3as which had grown their membership over several years. I contacted them to ask them the secret of their success. Quite spontaneously, a significant number attributed the success of their u3a to a mixture of nurturing their committee team and having some fun. Each of the u3as had their own distinct ways of doing so:

- Thank you meals (Lancaster and Morecombe, Penicuik, Benfleet, Windsor)
- Recognising and acknowledging individual contributions (Glenfield, Lancaster and Morecombe)
- Efficient, streamlined and well prepared and conducted meetings (Glenfield)
- Fostering a collaborative and collegiate approach (Windsor, Beeston, Southport, Glenfield)
- Capitalising on individual strengths and skills (Verulam, Windsor).

To give the last word to Waterlooville u3a, it summed up the approach of its committee in the following way:

The Committee is welcoming, friendly and pro-active, working in a collegiate way where responsibility is shared equally. Group Co-ordinators appreciate having a dedicated Groups Treasurer supporting the Treasurer and working directly with them. The Committee is also effective in modelling how interest groups should be run. Mark Dancey, Chairman, Waterlooville u3a