

How to guide:

7 steps to recruiting more interest group convenors

Interest group convenors are also called leaders, organisers, tutors, facilitators, contacts, enablers and no doubt a host of other names. Here they are referred to as convenors.

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to outline 7 steps to getting more interest group convenors.

“Ha!” you may think, “We’ve been working at this for x years and it’s getting more difficult all the time! And it’s not just u3a: it’s getting more difficult for all voluntary organisations.”

This may be true, but some u3as seem quite successful in recruiting convenors and this guide suggests a step by step process based firmly on their experiences.

Your experiences of using the guide are of vital importance. **Please keep a note of your suggestions for improvement and send them to feedback@u3a.org.uk**

The Seven Steps

These steps have been created from the experiences of over 40 u3as which successfully grew their membership over several years before the arrival of Covid19. Not every u3a took every step, but most of them took several. This guide synthesizes the steps they took.

The steps are:

1. **Set up your team**
2. **Agree your approaches**
3. **Sell the benefits**
4. **Offer different levels of commitment**
5. **Create support**
6. **Encourage succession planning**
7. **Define the problem**

It might seem a bit bizarre to define the problem *at the end*. We have adopted this order because the first six steps seem to be generally applicable to recruiting more group convenors, but the general approach will need to be fine-tuned to the specific issues you are addressing.

Step 1 Set up your team

You will need a willing, enthusiastic, capable and friendly team to support your interest group co-ordination role (or an extremely busy [not to mention heroic] Interest Group Coordinator), because you are developing and adapting your whole interest group offer for our current and evolving context. Some u3as have established a small team or a sub-committee to support their Interest Groups Coordinator. Some have created two or more co-ordinators

Step 2 Agree your approaches: hot, cold or warm?

How are you going to approach potential convenors? There are all sorts of ways from hot to cold. *Hot* implies a quite intensive personal approach to someone you know. It is obviously demanding of your group coordinator's time – another reason to adopt a team approach! Perhaps you will meet 1:2:1 over a drink and you will make your sales pitch.

Instead of waiting for volunteers we approach individuals personally to become convenors of second and third groups e.g. Bridge, Reading Groups. These may be existing or new members. Windsor u3a

At the other end of the spectrum a *very cold* approach implies no interpersonal interaction at all, such as a call in your newsletter for volunteers or a request made in the course of your general meeting or a general email from your Chair. The good news is that cold approaches don't take up much time or effort, but there is much anecdotal evidence that they aren't very effective either. Somewhere in the middle are *warm* approaches, e.g.

- Finding out about the interests of a new member as part of your welcome and induction process and exploring ways in which the new member might not only join existing groups but start a new one of their own. Anecdotally, in mature u3as a significant number of new groups are started by new members.
- Inviting all your members to a meeting – probably on line at the moment - where they can perhaps chat over a coffee about groups they would like to see develop and you can spot potential 'talent'
- Surveying your members about groups they would like to see and convening meetings of those who show an interest in a specific group. This might sound like a lot of work (another reason for a team approach) but using a tool like SurveyMonkey really makes surveys easy. It's free and you can teach yourself how to use it in less than an hour.
- Encouraging/supporting/inspiring/persuading your current group convenors to recruit deputy and associate convenors and to share out tasks in the group among group members. It shares some of the burden of running the group, and helpers and deputy convenors can become convenors of the future. It also provides cover if the group convenor is "absent" because of holiday, illness, or clashing commitments. For more on this approach, see Step 4 below.

Step 3 Sell the benefits

A general principle of selling – and you are trying to sell the idea of convenorship – is that you promote the benefits rather than describe the duties, available support etc. Benefits come in all shapes and sizes but here they can probably be sub-divided into immediate personal benefits and benefits to your u3a Personal and immediate benefits would include:

- Making new and deeper friendships – nothing bonds people together like a shared endeavour
- Finding a group of enthusiasts who want to share and explore the potential convenor's own interests, hobbies and dare we say, obsessions! A shared interest is more gratifying and satisfying than one pursued on your own.
- Learning a new skill – in the present context your new convenor will be developing a variety of technical and interpersonal skill (for more on technical skills see below)
- Acquiring new knowledge – there's nothing like facilitating or leading a discussion, sharing learning and negotiating and selecting the subjects for discussion, let alone preparing a presentation to help you, nay force you, to acquire new knowledge.
- Doing new things – if someone has never convened a group before it's a very useful experience to have at whatever age
- Experimenting and taking risks – u3a members are the nicest people, interest groups are an ideal and supportive context to try new things, push your boundaries, challenge yourself a bit, but in a safe way.
- Benefits to your u3a may appeal to some potential convenors who are willing to look beyond their subject. Benefits would include:
 - More opportunities for members
 - A deeper and richer offer to inspire potential new members
 - Relieve any capacity issues for any current groups
 - Ensure that a group continues when a long-standing convenor retires

Step 4 Offer different levels of commitment

A perfect or ideal u3a might be one where every single member is contributing a bit – however small – to the u3a. This is ambitious, but there is no question most people would rather make a commitment to a smallish task in a well-defined context than take on what looks like a huge task, and one which has to be developed and delivered from scratch.

There seem to be two principles here. In the words of the u3a National advice sheet *Recruiting and Valuing Volunteers*, share out the duties between members.

A co-leader or deputy can help in the event of absence (illness or holidays) and a facilitator can book the room, sort out the money etc, allowing the convenor to concentrate on his/her main function within the group.

*We have group co-ordinators not group leaders – most groups have pairs or a team who divide or share co-ordination tasks. **Dronfield u3a***

When we started, around half the membership expressed an interest in going on trips to local theatres or concert halls. The idea languished. A couple of meetings were held but no one was willing to take on the role of group convenor. At a third meeting (where numbers had dwindled to 8 people), the interest group coordinator facilitated a discussion where people loosened up a bit by describing their interests and hopes for the group. In answer to the \$64,000 question, about what they might contribute to make it happen, most people said they would be happy to organise a theatre outing if they could do so with another person. A couple of years later, the theatre planning group of 7 was meeting 4 or 5 times a year to create a programme, every member of the planning group was comfortable organising outings on their own, and the u3a was offering over 40 outings each year.

Carlton and Gedling u3a

The second principle is to encourage group members to participate, help out and make presentations etc. This can help to create a group culture where everyone pulls together. It will also avoid the convenor being seen as irreplaceable.

Step 5 Create support

In preCovid-19 days, most u3as seem to have developed a fairly comprehensive package of support for convenors, including a guidance manual of some kind, a list of available venues, regular meetings of all convenors, ways of collecting monies if necessary and ways of making payments, together with periodic updates and news from the interest group coordinator. Many u3as have also subscribed to Beacon which, among its other virtues, make the administration of an interest group so much easier.

The group co-ordinator holds regular meetings with [convenors] to discuss and share ideas. Where there are groups with vacancies there is a group sharing arrangement with other local u3as. This increases the opportunity for members. They are open to new interest groups starting and have an agreement to prime fund some start-ups, for example with paying for licences and helping with the initial venue rental with the expectation that the group will become self-sufficient. They also encourage members of the interest group to take the lead when the facilitator is unavailable, in order for the group to occur.

Waltham Abbey u3a

At the moment, however, the greatest need for support seems to be technical as u3as seek to extend their online and hybrid interest group offer. For more about extending and enriching your interest group offer, see the ***How to guide: Making your offer irresistible***.

Specific skills which your u3a might want to support and enhance might include:

- Getting the best from YouTube and the internet in terms of hand-holding, advice and perhaps on line coaching in how to conduct internet searches, convert search outcomes into useable material and how to create YouTube playlists.
- Getting the best out of Zoom, especially using the screen-sharing facility and assisting group members to connect with Zoom for the first time
- Using Doodle Poll to set up meetings – this shows potential attendees a list of dates and times asks them which suit, then automatically consolidates their replies and identifies the best time and date to meet. Saves a lot of time!

Other suggestions from *Recruiting and Valuing Volunteers* are

- to identify group convenors who are willing to act as mentors to support new convenors in the early stages;
- share success stories by asking existing convenors to talk about positive experiences of taking on the role, such as the challenges that they overcame or the confidence they gained
- dispel any misconceptions about what being a convenor means. In particular, try to demystify the role and communicate that you do not need to be an expert in a particular field to run a group successfully.
- Refer to the small army of Subject Advisors who are available, via the national u3a website, to support group convenors in a wide range of subject areas.

Step 6 Encourage succession planning

We have all heard tragic stories about the totally brilliant person who convened, may led, an exhilarating and stimulating interest group. When they retired after several years, no one was willing to take on the role and the group folded.

What's the message here? It's not that you don't want charismatic convenors! The message is that some succession arrangements made early in the life of the group should make life easier – even for the charismatic convenor – and ensure that other members of the group are willing and able to take on more responsibility when a convenor retires.

The best, if not the only, way to make this happen is to encourage convenors to have a deputy or even a team to support the group.

*No interest group should be facilitated by a single person. This makes it easier to start a new group, welcome new members and continue the group in the longer term. **Beeston***

u3a

*I am one of the committee of 6 or 7 running our garden group which has about 160 members (which I know shocks some people....) and it really is a shared endeavour which even has a little sub group organising our garden holidays. It works very well and it's true - we have become friends with a shared interest and shared responsibilities making the whole endeavour much more fun. Better still we have one of our group who loves a spreadsheet! **Sherburn and Villages u3a***

The objections you might get from the charismatic convenor are 'no one has offered' or 'it's easier and less hassle to do it all myself'. At the end of the day, you can't force someone to have a deputy but there are some quite strong arguments in favour:

- Have you asked anyone to do something for the group? Why not try now?
- After the initial investment in developing a deputy (or a team) it will make life easier for you and perhaps take away the parts of being a convenor that you don't really enjoy
- You will be developing the social and collaborative side of your group
- It's actually more fun.....it is, really
- You're developing potential successors and guaranteeing a long life for the group
- Well why don't you talk to xx and find out about how they've done it

If all else fails, perhaps you can persuade your charismatic loner to try a new arrangement for a period of time.

*Our Wine Tasting Group was getting a bit burdensome to convene after several years. The solution was to distribute the tasks within the group. Several members gained experience of running the tastings in the absence of the convenor. Set up & clear up groups were established. Someone else collected monies. Another couple bought the bread and cheese and yet another person collated and edited the tasting notes generated at each meeting and calculated the scores for each wine. When the group became too large for the accommodation, 2 helpers started a new group. **Carlton and Gedling u3a.***

Step 7 Define the problem

u3as are very diverse. Some have been established for many years; some are very recent. Some are urban, some rural; some are very large, others are small, with all shapes and sizes in between. Nevertheless issues around encouraging and recruiting interest group convenors seem to boil down into three main sorts:

- **New groups:** You have stopped forming new interest groups, or there aren't enough of them, or there are gaps in the range of interest groups you want to offer
- **Succession:** Current interest group convenor wants to stand down and no one in the group has offered to replace them

- **Closed groups:** Some of your interest groups are closed to new members either because of venue constraints or because the group feels that their operation would be impeded or undermined by new members.

The general strategy for each of these situations will be similar, but you might want to vary the emphasis you put on different steps in this 7 Step process.

In the event that the issue you are addressing is **New groups**, some general strategies to establish new groups are suggested in another *How to guide: Making your u3a offer irresistible*. In order to recruit new convenors for such groups, we would suggest placing a particular emphasis on 'Hot' and 'Warm' approaches, a very big sell on benefits and as much support as you can offer, tailored to the particular needs of the prospective convenor.

In order to resolve **Succession** issues, a particular emphasis might be placed on warm and hot approaches, selling the benefits to *both* the individual and the u3a – 'without you the group could fold' – and the possibilities of sharing the load, innovation and change. It's worth pausing over change and innovation.

If a group has run successfully by a convenor for several years, more or less single handed, the prospect of taking it on may seem especially daunting to a member of the group. It's really worth emphasizing that the group can evolve to suit both the new convenor(s) and the group. In other words the new team doesn't have to offer the same activities that the group may have got used to over several years.

*Our local history group nearly folded when the convenor stood down after a two year stint which had involved a number of excellent presentations (by the convenor), some well organised local history walks (designed and led by the convenor) and an innovative shared learning project (animated and led by the convenor). In the event, two people came forward to share the convenor role and the group has evolved in a new direction (visits to local historic buildings and landmarks) with a larger membership. **Carlton and Gedling u3a***

Closed groups seem to be a perennial and quite widespread problem. Many u3as make the most strenuous efforts to keep all their groups open, but experience intractable problems – e.g. venue size; well established friendship groups may have formed etc. In general terms, there seems to be three main ways forward:

- Split the existing group
- Move to a new venue
- Start a new group

Splitting the group might seem a bit drastic, but it can offer benefits. Assuming new convenors can be found for one of the groups (see above, **New groups** and **Succession**), the now two groups can meet in different venues or on different days of the week or

different weeks of the month, to suit their members. There is the added bonus that both groups retain friendship groups which new members can join.

*One of the groups, split and changed the venue of one of the groups to a location that was more convenient for just over half of the members. **Carlton and Gedling u3a***

Moving to a new venue is a fairly straightforward solution, particularly if your interest group coordinator has a list of possible venues. This might not be such a problem in these covid times, if groups are meeting on line or as hybrid group.

Starting a new group, finally, may be the best way forward for a particular group. Clearly, only offering new members the opportunity to go on a waiting list is not terribly attractive. Starting a new group can work well where a u3a is fairly proactive in getting interested members together and facilitating a discussion to find a solution.

*Ask members to let groups coordinator know when a group is full, to enable groups coordinator to begin the process of starting a new group. **Beeston u3a***

We find generally members are reluctant to volunteer to become [group convenors] but if we can get a group together without initially insisting on [having one], we can soon find a volunteer to take on the role – often the new member who was reluctant to volunteer!

Caterham u3a

*We have banned the words ‘closed’ and ‘currently fully subscribed’. If there is even a short waiting list, we will encourage one of the people on the list to act as convenor with support from the existing convenor. The existing convenor will offer to sit in with the new group for the first few meetings. This is exactly how we have grown to 4 art groups, 4 table tennis groups, 6 French groups, etc! **Chepstow u3a***

Good luck