

Committees and Procedures

When each U3A becomes a member of the Third Age Trust, hereafter referred to as the Trust, the U3A agrees to accept the Objects and Principles of the Movement. However, each local U3A remains an independently managed, self governing charitable organisation, within the framework of The Trust. It is vital to the success of a new U3A that it has a lively, effective and ambitious management committee, all members of which will be trustees. The object of this leaflet is to share some of the experiences of U3As which are thriving.

AT THE START

At the launch of a new U3A, it is important to get together a group of “volunteers” to form a Steering Committee, to organise its activities and manage its affairs, particularly its finances. This Steering Committee will guide the new U3A during its formative period. A representative of the Third Age Trust will be present at the first steering committee meeting. This meeting will take place after the launch and before the inaugural (first) meeting of the new U3A. The representative will go through the constitution, the timing of the financial year, the make-up of the committee and other aspects of committee work that are of immediate concern. The U3A will need a Chairman, a Secretary and a Treasurer who may be elected by the members of the Steering Committee themselves or by a meeting of all those interested in forming the new U3A. It is important that all members of the committee are fully conversant with the Objects and Principles of the U3A movement.

The Steering Committee will guide the new U3A during its early months of existence and will be responsible for the formal application to the Trust for both temporary and full membership and for agreeing the detail of the model constitution. This will include length of service for officers and committee members, election procedures, the stated quorum for committee meetings and AGMs etc. The Steering Committee will remain in office until the first AGM, which will usually be between 4 and 8 weeks after the end of the financial year, at which time, the steering committee stands down and elections are held for the officers and members. Any member of the steering committee can of course stand for election. During the period leading up to your first AGM, you may find some members of the steering committee do not wish to continue and you may then decide to invite other people to join you, but ideally you will stay together.

When considering the model constitution it is important to work out how many officers are required e.g. one Vice Chairman or two and what the maximum size of the committee should be in order to spread the workload and cover all the required areas of work. During your first 12 months, you may find your membership increases rapidly and you need sufficient numbers to deal with it. All too often in voluntary organisations, a few willing members carry the bulk of the burden whilst the rest enjoy the provisions. U3A is all about sharing and participation, from leading an interest group, to writing minutes, to making the tea. It is important that the ethos of participation and sharing the workload is established as soon as possible in a new U3A. To that end the committee may find that the establishment of sub-committees and working parties not only helps the committee, but increases the atmosphere of participation and shared ownership.

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A set of sample job descriptions, provided by various U3As, is available from the National Office. Having a well balanced committee makes for a stable and successful U3A in the long term. Up to 12 people with the possibility of 2 co-options, is a manageable size.

The Golden Rules for an effective committee meeting are:

- prepare beforehand
- be involved
- explore the issues
- take responsibility
- make decisions
- follow them up.

Committees tend to be ineffective when:

- they are unclear about their objectives and focus
- people opt out, don't turn up regularly or don't contribute to the meetings
- there is a lack of preparation before the meeting
- decisions are sewn up by a small group before the meetings
- there is a lack of clarity about what has been decided
- there is a lack of follow up after the meeting.

THE CONSTITUTION

The constitution will specify the way that Officers and non-officer members of the committee are elected i.e. annually which is Option 1 or fixed term which is Option 2. It will also specify the period of service allowed in certain roles and the maximum consecutive service possible in a combination of roles.

FUNCTIONS

Chairman

The Chairman, together with the Secretary, will decide on an agenda and must be well informed on all the issues to be discussed and their relative importance and aware of where decisions are needed. The Chairman holds a key position during the meeting. He/she should have a strong enough personality to keep control of the meeting and to be able to deal firmly, fairly and tactfully with disruption or aggression. It should be remembered that all decisions must be committee decisions and that the Chairman has no special executive powers other than those stated in the constitution.

A sense of humour is vital! A good Chairman will vary his/her style according to the purpose of the meeting. He/she should recognise a hidden agenda and allow it to be brought out into the open. Anyone trying to use the meeting to satisfy his own aims should be very quickly dealt with. The Chairman must be a facilitator and an enabler. He/she should be a good listener as well as a communicator, controlling the length of the discussion to allow the meeting to move forward to the next item.

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Tasks:

- To maintain the aims and objectives of the U3A
- To preserve order at meetings (all members must address their remarks via the Chairman and not directly to the person)
- To ensure the correct procedure is followed
- To guide the discussion in a positive manner, all the time assuming a neutral role
- To allow different points to be expressed
- To encourage participation from all members, especially the quieter ones
- To stick to the agenda and avoid side tracking
- To remain calm when strong feelings are expressed
- To draw discussions to a conclusion and to summarise fairly, the arguments “for and against” an issue
- To ensure that decisions are followed through, often in conjunction with the Secretary.

He/she needs to be:

- Flexible in approach
- Diplomatic and approachable
- A positive leader.

Chairing a committee is a responsible job which requires hard work and considerable skill. It should not be seen as a reward or status symbol.

Vice Chairman/men

One of roles of a Vice Chairman is to deputise for the Chairman and so he/she will need to be familiar with all necessary procedures and able to assume responsibility at short notice, if required to do so. You may wish to consider having two Vice Chairmen in the hope that one at least, may consider standing for Chairman in the future. It may also be sensible to allocate a specific role to your Vice Chairman/men e.g. publicity, newsletter editor etc.

Secretary

The Secretary is usually the committee organiser and more often than not, the person most involved in the practical running of the U3A. He/she keeps the wheels of the organisation turning. The Chairman and the Secretary need to be able to work well together and agree upon a course of action. Mutual trust is essential. The Secretary can be the committee scribe but a non-committee minutes secretary has been found by U3As to be a very useful appointment providing confidentiality is maintained.

He/she needs to be:

- A good organiser
- Systematic
- Diplomatic and approachable
- A clear thinker
- Calm.

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Tasks:

- To keep the Chairman well informed as correspondence is often addressed to the Secretary
- To construct the agenda for the meetings with the Chairman
- To send out agendas with relevant discussion papers in good time
- To arrange venues as required
- To take spare copies of the papers
- To convey decisions taken to the people who may be required to take action
- To take action as required following the meeting
- To deal with correspondence following discussion with the Chairman
- To maintain full and accurate files including minutes
- To be the point of contact and reference between meetings
- To be the link with the National Office and to ensure that information is relayed to the committee and passed on to the membership.
- If no minutes secretary exists, to take fair and accurate minutes of the meeting
- To write the minutes and having agreed them with the chairman, circulate them to the committee

Treasurer

If a committee is handling money i.e. receiving it and paying it out, it needs a Treasurer.

Tasks:

- To open and operate a bank account/bank accounts
- To make a recommendation on cheque signatories for committee approval
- To maintain accurate and sufficiently detailed financial records in accordance with the requirements of Charity Law
- To report to the Committee on finance at each meeting
- To prepare the statement of accounts for examination and presentation to the AGM
- To prepare a budget annually
- To recommend the level of subscription to be paid by the members
- To pay approved invoices
- To pay agreed expenses (it may be necessary to devise an appropriate claim form)
- To keep all receipts
- To ensure that the committee has agreed appropriate procedures for the handling of financial matters. This will be discussed with the Chairman and Secretary beforehand so that an overall scheme can be put to the committee for approval. This may include discussions about travelling expenses and/or telephone calls made on behalf of the committee, petty cash floats etc. See the 'Information for Treasurers' booklet.

At the outset it is of utmost importance to decide on a realistic sum for your annual subscription, bearing in mind the capitation fee to the Third Age Trust, and the way you are going to handle/finance your interest groups. Some U3As charge an overall annual fee applicable to all members irrespective of the number of interest groups they attend. Others levy a smaller membership subscription and then make an additional charge for each interest group attended or just for groups incurring costs for room hire.

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As new U3As will have no idea of the number of interest groups that will start in their first year, the second method may be more suitable but consider both methods. It has to be remembered, there will be a fixed fee payable for the use of a hall and this will be the same regardless of the number of attendees. Where interest groups are held in members' homes it is usual for the hosts to receive a small sum to cover the cost of a cup of tea and a biscuit, for example. You should budget for some reserves from the outset, to cover equipment, hire of meeting rooms, stationery, postage, photocopying and general expenses, rather than having to raise the subscription on an annual basis because needs must. Whatever the decision, the amount decided upon must be sufficient to fund the U3A adequately. (See the 'Information for Treasurers' booklet).

Committee Members

In addition to the officers, there are committee members who will carry out other important and defined functions, for example, membership secretary, speaker secretary, groups' co-ordinator, etc.

Co-opted Members

Committees have the power to co-opt (check your constitution before you proceed). This means that the committee may invite other people who have not been elected to join until the next AGM and they have the same status and responsibilities of elected trustees. Care needs to be taken to ensure that this power is not abused. It is a facility to ensure that a committee has the necessary skills and expertise and to replace a member who has to leave the committee, but it must not be used for by-passing the electoral system or as a reward for favours received.

It is important to remember that everybody on the committee is a trustee regardless of whether you have registered with the regulatory authorities.

COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The agenda for a committee meeting follows a basic structure:

Heading date, time and place of meeting

AGENDA

1. Apologies for absence.
2. Minutes of the last meeting (these should have been previously circulated to the committee and once agreed, the Chairman should sign them).
3. Matters arising (items which were discussed at the last meeting which need to be followed up – helpful to list these. If it is likely that an item will need a lot of discussion make it an agenda item).
4. Correspondence.
5. Chairman's report.
6. Secretary's report.

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7. Treasurer's report.
8. Important items (papers often enclosed).
9. Minor items.
10. Any other business (helpful if the chairman is informed of items in advance so they can be listed. If an important item is raised here it may be better to carry it over to the next meeting as an agenda item).
11. Date, time and place of next meeting.

It is important to start meetings on time and to ensure that they follow the published agenda. If not, members will become irritated and frustrated. Also do not go on interminably or people will find excuses not to turn up in the future.

The Chairman should make it clear when an item is for discussion only and when a decision is needed. In some situations it may be wise for the Chairman to introduce the item to be discussed by summarising the background to the discussion. The Chairman is responsible for creating and sustaining the momentum of the meeting and recognising which items require more time. **The Chairman must remain impartial at all times.** Before a vote, the Chairman should summarise the arguments for and against where appropriate. A proposer and seconder should be sought and then a vote taken. Voting is by a show of hands and votes for, against and abstentions should be recorded. If the committee is of one mind and there is no dissent, it should be recorded as having been carried 'nem con'. If the votes are equal, the Chairman has a casting vote.

Confidentiality

Once a committee decision has been reached, committee members are expected to accept and abide by it. Most people recognise that decisions are not always going to be to their liking, but that is the nature of democracy. Opinions expressed in meetings should be regarded as confidential.

Sub-Committees

If the workload becomes a problem you may want to consider creating a sub-committee, which will be answerable to the main committee and will exist solely to do the work passed to it by the main committee. A sub-committee can be permanent or created for a finite period of time to perform a specific task. A sub-committee will operate as any other committee with a Chairman and Secretary so that its deliberations can be reported back. It may be chaired by a member of the main committee and have several committee members on it, but it may also include U3A members who are invited to join for their particular expertise. A sub-committee can only advise the main committee; it cannot make its own decisions.

AGMs

An Annual General Meeting is a constitutional requirement. It keeps members informed, it gives them a voice, it enables elections to take place and it accepts the annual report and accounts. It should be no later than 15 months since the previous AGM and in order to

proceed, must be quorate. (Consult your constitution and Advice Sheet 4—Organising Your AGM).

What needs to happen prior to the AGM:

- Notice of date, place and time sent to all members as early as possible
- Members should be invited to submit proposed and seconded motions by a set date
- Members should be invited to submit proposed and seconded nominations for vacant officer and committee members
- A detailed agenda should then be sent to all members at least 21 days before so they can see what is going to be discussed and decide whether to attend.

The Meeting

Although an AGM is a formal meeting which requires rules and procedures to be adhered to, it should be as friendly and relaxed as possible and members should be encouraged to take an active part in discussions.

The Agenda must include the following items:

- Minutes of last AGM (unless it is your first)
- Annual report of U3A activities (this may include reports from the chairman, groups' co-ordinator etc)
- Examined accounts for the previous year
- Election of the committee
- Any constitutional changes or if it is your first AGM the acceptance of your constitution
- Proposed motions.

Standing Orders

Standing orders govern the conduct of meetings and help them to run smoothly by minimising potential areas of argument about procedures. They should be clear and concise. If you feel a set is required in order to make your AGM run more efficiently, it should include:

- Arrangements for chairing the meeting
- Deadlines for submitting motions and nominations
- Procedures for voting
- Restrictions on length of speeches
- Procedure for raising questions or points of order

Consult Advice Sheet 13 for further guidance.

Encouraging attendance at AGMs

There are various things you can do:

- Ensure the venue is easily accessible by car and public transport
- Ensure the venue has sufficient capacity and is comfortable
- Provide refreshments afterwards and encourage members to stay and chat
- Invite a speaker for afterwards.

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Elections should be by secret ballot but motions can be voted on by a show of hands and where necessary a count.

MINUTES

Minutes are important as the written record of what took place and the decisions taken at a meeting, whether it be a committee or general meeting. In a way they record the past history of the group and may be very useful for reference purposes with the passage of time. The minutes may be needed to substantiate a claim or defend one made against the organisation. Accuracy is essential in respect of decisions taken.

Writing the minutes

Whoever is responsible for writing the minutes should take plenty of notes at the meeting and then pick out what is wanted for the draft. For this reason it is easier if there is a Minute Secretary since it is difficult to participate in discussions and be responsible for recording the meeting as well.

It might be useful to appoint two minute takers to ensure accuracy and enable cross-checking.

The order of items must be the same as the agenda and should be numbered. It is also helpful if the items are given headings to assist reference in the future. Every agenda item must be recorded. A verbatim account is not necessary, but whilst brevity is best, the minutes must be a fair and accurate record and convey meaning when read later, particularly by someone who was unable to attend.

The outcome and whether a vote was taken must be clearly indicated, plus who is responsible for any action to be taken.

Minutes of a Committee Meeting should be set out as follows:

**Minutes of theU3A committee meeting held on.....(date) at.....(venue)
at.....(time)**

Present..... (Chairman, followed by names of those present in alphabetical order and titles e.g. Treasurer etc).

Apologies for absence.

1. Minutes of last meeting.
The Chairman asks if he/she may sign as a correct record. Any alterations to the wording or errors must be agreed and minuted before the Chairman signs them with the date.
2. Matters arising.
3. Numbered items as they appear on the agenda.

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Decisions taken must be clear for example:

It was proposed by Mary Smith and seconded by John Jones that the Chairman should approach the Director of Adult Education with a view to the possibility of the use of facilities for computer classes.

Agreed nem con.

Minutes are usually numbered from the beginning of the meeting. However some are numbered with the year appearing on the numbering e.g. 2011.1/2011.1i/2011.2 etc.

Decide on what seems most appropriate and stick to it.

A system of checking is needed to ensure that any action agreed is activated so that it can be reported on at the next meeting. Minutes are written in the past tense. Do not use "they" or "we", use the "the study day sub-committee" or "committee members" for example. Minutes are written in impersonal style to appear objective. Give thought to the choice of words used to ensure accuracy and avoid ambiguity.

Finally finish with "There being no further business, the meeting closed at.....(time).

Signed..... Date.....