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Volunteers must step up for u3a to survive

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Third Age Trust has done its best to lift spirits and provide advice about recruitment and participation.

Nevertheless, many u3as have struggled to reach their pre-pandemic membership levels. Another continuing problem, having spoken with committee members of other u3as, is finding people willing to help to run their charity and its activities.

In its Our Vision statement, the Third Age Trust has confirmed that members should play an active part in running the u3a movement. Yet, in my experience, most members I have talked to don't realise this. Many regard their local u3a simply as a provider of a range of established activity services which they have paid to join.

The notion of joining a wider movement – as mentioned by the vision statement – also has little traction with prospective new members. The ones I have spoken to often want to join for only one specific activity. If that activity turns out to be full, or even if it changes its location, they don't join.

The core principles of 'self-help learning' and 'mutual aid' indicate that

members are invited to work together to make things happen.

A volunteering ethos is central to both of these principles. My experience is that this ethos is thin on the ground among most (90 per cent or more) people who join.

Induction and meet-the-committee events are held. The volunteering mantra is repeated to those few who turn up. Then maybe five per cent volunteer to help out.

Most members expect things to be done for them. Others don't join in with activities – especially those men who have been enrolled (reluctantly) by their wives.

Should we be surprised by this? In my experience, the answer is no. Why? Well, one reason seems to be a reluctance to push too hard on the volunteering aspect of the u3a – at both national and local levels – for fear of discouraging potential members from joining up. Once they have joined, therefore, new members understandably don't expect to help out because nobody told them otherwise.

This non-volunteering ethos can have damaging consequences. When a group convener steps down, after many years of loyal service,



u3a is built on an ethos of self-help learning

“Members are invited to work together to make things happen”

more often than not the group will end because no other group members will want to take over, even though they know how it runs. Complaints might follow. Yet, ultimately, apathy reigns.

Members will suggest ideas for new groups. Do they want to help run them? No, not often. Meetings can be organised to discuss how the proposed new group could be run. Almost invariably, no one will want to take even partial responsibility for it.

So what can be done about this? One way forward might be to bring the volunteering

ethos up front and centre in our recruitment messaging. We need to dispel common external notions that the u3a offers 'classes' or is run by permanent 'tutors'. Instead, maybe we should frame the u3a as offering settings in which retired people can meet with others by attending, supporting and helping to run current activities and creating new ones that meet their mutual interests.

Let's not be afraid to acknowledge why the u3a was developed and, importantly, of what we need from our members to survive.