

SHARED PRACTICE GUIDE 012 – ESTABLISHING PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

Rev 01

1. Introduction

Shared practice guides (SPG) are a vehicle to share knowledge between the U3As in the London area. They are created by collating knowledge and experiences from those U3As. They are only a guide – what worked for one U3A might not work for your U3A. If in your experience something is wrong or you disagree with something, please write in to allow an update to be created and published. It's hoped these Guides will grow over time with more shared experiences.

2. Scope

This particular SPG addresses the aspect of establishing “Peer Groups”. These are sometimes called Role Support Networks or mini networks.

3. Background

Several regions have developed Peer Groups to help promote cross learning across networks.

A Peer Group is defined as a grouping of members holding similar committee or other responsibilities within their U3A. (e.g. a ‘Treasurers’ peer group). A Peer Group network would enable members of a regional Peer Group to engage in mutual support by solving shared problems, describing best practice, exchanging ideas for new developments, etc. The members could be current post-holders but could also be past or prospective postholders or an ordinary U3A member – wherever the interest or competency lies.

They could be across regions -at Interest Group Coordinators level.

4. Format

Each Per Group would be self-managing and responsible for deciding on aspects such as management style e.g. informal or formal (with a committee, agenda, minutes etc.) frequency and venues of meetings, or whether they wish to be a ‘virtual’ group; membership and how they keep records of and communicate with their members (bearing in mind data protection regulations); whether or not to charge fees to cover costs, etc.

Although the Peer Groups would be self-managing, it is expected that there would be regular communication with their Regional Network or U3A regarding developments, performance and any issues arising. There may be some aspects that come up at a U3A or Network meeting which the relevant Peer Group may be asked to review and resolve.

Each network could have a facility to communicate with their members and others as required.

5. Learnings

a. From London Region

LRU3A stated Peer Groups in 2019. Their intention was to set up several at Executive committee role level. Currently they have established groups for:

- Treasurers – **running, just**
- Groups Coordinators – **strong & growing**
- Webmasters / IT – **running**
- Communications organisers (inc Newsletter Editors, email and website notifications) - **beginning imminently**

As above, some are stronger than others. So the key is will they be sustainable? It needs energy from someone or a few to keep it going. Online works ok. Mixed skill level is good. Can be cost neutral.

b. From Notts Region

See Appendix 1 for detailed feedback from the Notts Region on their Peer Support Groups.

c. Peer Group Protocols

It is important that each Peer Group develops the way they want to operate and there isn't only one way to fit all cases. However it's probably good practice that each group develop their terms of reference or the 'Protocol' of how they are going to function.

An example of a Protocol (for a Chairs Peer Group) is included in Appendix 2. If others exist for other Peer Groups please submit to the address in Section 7 so they can be included in future updates of this SPG.

d. Group Coordinators Peer Group

As mentioned above, a Peer Group can be formed for any Executive Committee role. An example would be Group Coordinators. See Appendix 3 for some information and feedback from the Northumbrian Region's Groups Coordinator's Peer Group.

6. Reference Material

There is no specific Advice on the National website regarding formation and operation of Peer Groups.

7. Contact Point

If you have any queries on content of this SPG or can offer any updates please contact:

Webmaster.londonregionu3a@gmail.com

APPENDIX 1 – NOTTS NETWORK PEER SUPPORT GROUPS TIPS AND WHEEZES

Introduction

1. **What are Peer Support Groups (PSG)?** *PSGs provide opportunities for U3A committee members in their various roles and interest group leaders to come together, share experiences and learn from each other.*
2. **Scope:** *There are well over 200 types of interest group and different committee roles in Notts U3As, so we have plenty to go at.*
3. **Costs:** *Venue costs should be borne by the host U3A. There should be no costs to the Notts Network. Every U3A will benefit many times over from the opportunities to attend PSGs hosted by other U3As.*
4. **PSGs vs Workshops:** *PSGs should be relatively informal meetings hosted by individual U3As. They may only meet once for a couple of hours, if that is sufficient for their purpose. Workshops are more formal one day or half day events and are organized by the Network or by the U3A at county, regional or national level.*
5. **Information:** Please send me a note of any PSG that you want to organise to help avoid duplication (Paul Martinez email: pkmartinez14@gmail.com). Also, if you have any ideas to help make the present tips more useful, please let me know.

Tips and Wheezes

1. **Venue:** consider cost; perhaps get an idea of how many people may attend before choosing a venue.
2. **Getting people to come:** it's much, much easier to send out invitations through the Notts Network than to establish your own lists of contacts. The Network contact is
3. **Transport:** can you help people find the venue by providing a map, post code and details of public transport.
4. **Agenda:** You will probably want to ask people about their interests and hot topics when you send out the initial invitation. You may want to circulate a draft agenda for comment to the first people who accept the invitation to your PSG.
5. **Preparation:** there may be things you want participants to do before the meeting. They will need more or less notice, depending on what they are.
6. **Outcomes:** As an absolute minimum, you could create circulate a list of attendees with their contact details (subject to their agreement), and a note of useful ideas and information shared at the meeting. As a maximum.....the sky is the limit. U3A family historians now have an annual national conference in Buxton which started off as a Derbyshire meeting of interest group leaders. See below on keeping in contact.
7. **Running the meeting:** You will need a note taker and a chair. Will a two hour meeting be sufficient for your purposes?

8. **Reporting:** The main purpose of reporting is to share the outcomes with the group and whoever is unable to attend on the day. *You might want to share outcomes with U3As which have not attended.*
9. **Follow Up:** It will be up to each Peer Support Group to decide if it wants a follow up meeting and/or if it wants to put in place some continuing means of staying in contact or sharing information (see next point)
10. **Keeping in touch:** it is quite easy to set up a Google Group which is private to U3As and which can provide a mechanism for everyone to keep in touch and which doesn't need a secretary! We can help you create one.

Paul Martinez, Support Officer, Notts Network of U3As
February 2020

APPENDIX 2 – Protocol for Chairs’ Network - Northumbria Region U3A

From: July 26.06.2016 Chairs’ Network Mid, NE and Coastal Northumbria Regional U3As

Purpose of the Network:

To provide a wider support network for those in the role of Chair or Vice-Chair

To share and discuss best practice, with reference to national documents (eg the Blue File) and our own practice.

To provide informal induction for those new to the role of Chair and Vice-Chair

To liaise so as to make social events more viable

To share educational events and trips to make them more viable.

Membership:

So as maintain relevance and focus, attendance should be from the Chair and/or a Vice Chair of each member U3A.

Members should be able to discuss issues as freely as they need, so confidentiality must be respected

APPENDIX 3 – Northumbria Groups Coordinators Support Network

This is an extract from the Northumbria Regional Quarterly magazine:

Introduction

The Groups Coordinator (GC) of any of our U3As is welcome to join this network. Our meetings have become more frequent in the last few months as there is a lot to discuss, with many difficult decisions to be made about the way forward. We're now meeting every few weeks using Zoom, on different days/times to try to include as many people as possible at least some of the time; the next meeting is on the morning of Friday 27th November on Zoom. We are glad of the advice of one of the Trust Volunteers and the Regional Trustee on some of the trickier issues. There's also a Google group where information and ideas can be posted, which any GC is welcome to join.

Here are a few comments from members about the benefits of the network:

As I am a new GC, I found it extremely useful to be able to discuss with other coordinators what they are doing to help groups at this time of Covid and how they are managing to keep in contact with members...

...These meetings are most useful as they allow GC to discuss the various facets of their u3a's approach to dealing with the present lock down situation. It is interesting to hear how each individual approaches the matter, and we can learn from one another...

...very useful to know what to be aware of in the u3a Covid-19 guidelines. I found the discussion on Zoom very helpful, as I feel this is the way forward for some groups in the short term...

...I was immensely relieved when this network was set up and I had the chance to ask others what they did about various aspects of the role, including people from the Trust whose guidance I could rely on, knowing that it was not just an opinion; also to discover that others had the same problems as I did, and to be reassured that I wasn't doing too bad a job!

...There are many advantages to having a support network including the exchange of information and hearing about latest updates. For me, one of the most important aspects of such a meeting is the human interaction. We can share a joke, listen to each other and see with fresh eyes the experiences and ideas that other groups have had, we all need each other during these uncertain times. There really is no substitute for a friendly smile...

Notes from the meetings are circulated to all the GCs for whom we have contact information, but that misses out nearly half of the U3As in our region. Any GC who would like to receive the notes and invitations to the meetings, please contact If you are not the GC for your U3A, and if you don't know whether your GC is already involved, please can you pass on this information to him/her, or to someone appropriate if there is no GC in post. Many thanks.