

Advice from the u3a Trust regarding Committees and Procedures

When each U3A Branch becomes a member of The Third Age 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, whether it be a pre-AGM steering committee or an elected committee, with or without co-opted members.

The Golden Rules for an effective committee meeting are:

- Prepare beforehand.
- Be involved.
- Explore the issues.
- Take responsibility.
- Make decisions.
- Follow them up.

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 and 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.

He/she needs to be:

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

Tasks:

- To maintain the charitable objectives/purposes 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 in discussion and decision-making, 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.

Vice Chairman

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.

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.

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 and equipment as required.
- To take spare copies of the papers.
- To ensure the meeting is quorate (check your constitution).
- 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 and, having agreed them with the Chairman, circulate them to the committee for approval at the next committee meeting.

Treasurer

The Treasurer is responsible for the efficient handling of all the financial affairs of the U3A. If a committee is handling money i.e. receiving it and paying it out, it needs a Treasurer.

He/she needs to be:

- Methodical.
- A good communicator.

- Able to look at the bigger picture but with a good eye for detail.

Tasks:

- To organise the opening and operation of a bank account or bank accounts in accordance with the wishes of the Committee.
- To make a recommendation on cheque signatories for committee approval.
- To ensure that strong financial management procedures and internal controls are in place.
- To maintain accurate and sufficiently detailed financial records in accordance with the requirements of the regulatory authorities.
- 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 recommend an appropriate level of reserves.
- To set out and agree policies for reimbursement of expenses, petty cash floats etc.

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 has the role of a trustee, regardless of whether your U3A has 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 i.e. items which were discussed at the last meeting which need to be followed up. It is helpful to list these and 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.

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.

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 can consider appointing sub-committees to perform a function or a specific task. These sub-committees should include at least one member of the main committee to ensure full and prompt reporting. The main committee must agree terms of reference, which should clearly state that the role is purely advisory and does not have decision-making powers or expenditure authority.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETINGS

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. Ideally you should aim to hold it approximately six to eight weeks after the end of your financial year. In order to proceed, it must be quorate. If the required quorum, as stated in your constitution, is not present, adjourn the meeting to another day and time giving the appropriate notice required in your constitution.

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 by a set date.

A detailed agenda plus supporting papers 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) and matters arising.

- Annual report of U3A activities (this will include reports from the Chairman and possibly other members of the committee e.g. groups' co-ordinator).
- Examined accounts for the previous year.
- Appointment of an independent examiner.
- Election of the committee.
- Any constitutional changes, or if it is your first AGM, the acceptance by your members 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.
- Procedures and deadlines for submitting motions and nominations.
- Procedures for voting.
- Restrictions on length of speeches.
- Procedure for raising questions or points of order.

Encouraging attendance at AGMs

There are various things you can do:

- Ensure the venue is easily accessible by car and public transport and suitable for members with disabilities.
- Ensure there is adequate parking.
- Ensure the venue has sufficient capacity, is comfortable and has the facilities you need.
- Provide refreshments afterwards and encourage members to stay and chat.
- Invite a speaker either before or after the meeting.

Contested elections should be by secret ballot but motions generally can be voted on by a show of hands. In the case of a change to the constitution, votes should be counted and retained.

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 Minutes Secretary since it is difficult to participate in discussions and be responsible for recording the meeting as well.

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 the U3A 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. Once signed they form the only legal record of the business of the meeting

2. Matters arising.

3. Numbered items as they appear on the agenda.

Decisions taken must be clear for example:

Minutes are usually numbered from the commencement of the Branch.

Finally finish with:

“There being no further business, the meeting closed at.....(time).

The next meeting will be

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

DOCUMENT RETENTION

Financial documents - at least 6 years.

AGM reports, annual accounts and minutes should be retained for the life of the association.

Committee meeting minutes should be permanently retained but where it is difficult or impractical to do so, a minimum of 6 years is recommended.