

U3A CHAIRS' FORUM: MEETING NOTES 9th SEPTEMBER 2025

U3A COUNCIL

73 Chairs in attendance

Background & Summary

1. Sue Russell, u3a Council Chair, spoke to the Chairs' Forum to update on the Council's progress and to hear views from Chairs.
2. The u3a Council began work on 1 April under the new governance structure agreed at last October's AGM. Since then, the Council has identified five priority areas, now being scoped for discussion with the Board. The priorities are:
 - Communication between u3as and the Trust, particularly around enquiries and complaints.
 - The website, especially the difficulty of finding advice and guidance materials.
 - Recruitment of new members and committees.
 - Communication within the movement – 'how we talk to each other.'
 - The Brand Centre (currently paused while the issues are clarified).
3. Work has also begun to shape the Council's Strategy Implementation Groups, which will, in collaboration with the Office, help develop and implement the Trust's four strategic aims. Recommendations have been presented to the Board.
4. Participants noted a disconnect between the Trust and local u3as, citing concerns about attitude, communication, and accountability. Some saw the same pattern in how the Board and Office relate to the Council. The discussion stressed that u3a is not a hierarchy but a network of u3as, networks, and the Trust, with the membership at its heart.
5. Participants felt that the Trust's guidance is often too complex, making it hard to apply in practice and discouraging volunteers from taking on roles. They stressed the need for simpler, clearer materials, and for greater recognition of solutions already developed locally.
6. Participants raised concern at the Board's decision to name a 'preferred' candidate in the Vice-Chair election, widely regarded as inappropriate and likely to deter candidates in future. The Council has reported these concerns to the Board.
7. The Chairs' Forum is an independent peer group for u3a Chairs to share experience and raise issues. Sue Russell welcomed its contribution, noting that while independent, it provides insights to support the Council's work with u3as and other parts of the Trust.

Introduction

Sue Russell, u3a Council Chair, opened the meeting with an update on the Council's role under the new governance structure, its progress so far, and its priorities for the coming months.

She reminded the Forum that the changes grew out of the Fit for the Future project, agreed at the October AGM. The Board has now been slimmed down, with members focused on governance, charity law, finance, and oversight. The newly formed Council, by contrast, carries responsibility for matters directly affecting u3as.

In the early months, Council members have focused on building working relationships and testing how to take ideas forward in practice. Sue acknowledged that some members had felt the Council had been 'too quiet,' and she outlined steps being taken to improve visibility: a possible regular column in u3a Matters, consideration of a social media presence, and stronger encouragement for local u3as to invite Council representatives to their events or committee meetings.

Recruitment to the Council remains a live issue. Several vacancies exist already, and by April 2026 up to eight current members will be completing their terms. Sue encouraged Forum members to encourage potential candidates from their membership and networks.

The Council has been concentrating on identifying key issues for u3as. Rather than rushing to solutions, the approach has been to define problems clearly and pass these to the Board for action. Five priority areas have emerged:

- Communication between u3as and the Trust, particularly around enquiries and complaints.
- The website, especially the difficulty of finding advice and guidance materials.
- Recruitment of new members and committees.
- Communication within the movement – ‘how we talk to each other.’
- The Brand Centre (currently paused while the issues are clarified).

The most advanced piece of work concerns the strategy implementation groups. These were originally set up by the Board to deliver agreed strategies but have not proved effective. A Council task force has reviewed the situation and made recommendations to the Board.

Sue concluded by inviting Forum members to feed in the issues they are most concerned about. These will shape the agenda for the Council's next meeting in November.

Discussion

Accountability

A question was raised about whether the Council has the power to hold the Third Age Trust accountable.

Sue Russell acknowledged that there is a real sense within the Council that, so far, it has not carried much authority or been able to make tangible things happen. ‘That’s down to us to change,’ she said.

She emphasised that Council members represent the u3a membership—not the Board or the staff. For the Council to be relevant, it must carry weight and be seen to deliver on what Chairs and members identify as priorities.

The clearer the input from local u3as, the stronger the Council's mandate. Sue's message to Chairs was: tell us what matters, and we will do our best to make it happen.

Council Relations

One participant commented that references to the Council and the Board often sounded like a ‘them and us’ situation, rather than two parts of the same organisation working together.

Sue Russell was clear that this was not the case with the Board. The relationship is constructive, though there is work to do in strengthening links with the Office. Regular meetings are now helping to build understanding and improve ways of working.

Attitude Towards Member u3as

Participants raised concerns about the Trust's attitude towards its stakeholders, asking whether the Board was listening effectively to the Council and whether this was enabling real progress. Sue acknowledged that the perception of being ‘uphill’ was real: the Council's role as the voice of members is vital, but progress has sometimes been difficult. She stressed that the Board itself has been supportive when approached, but that uncertainty over the Council's role, together with inconsistent messages from different sources, has made it harder for the Council to move forward with clarity and confidence.

This discussion also prompted reflection on the nature of the u3a movement. Sue emphasised that it is not a hierarchy, but an interconnected network with the membership at its heart and networks, local u3as, the Trust, and the Council all important strands in that net.

Strategy Implementation Groups

A question was asked about the future of the Council's Strategy Implementation Groups (SIGs), with one member expressing disappointment that they might have been discontinued.

Sue Russell explained that when the Council reviewed the SIGs in June, their continuation was already uncertain. The concern was that, while the groups had been set up to implement strategy, that work was

not happening as intended. The Council examined what had gone wrong—asking, for example, what characteristics were needed in the membership of each group.

Sue outlined the intended structure: the Board should lead on planning strategy; the Council should identify member concerns to feed into that planning; and the SIGs should then be responsible for contributing to implementation. At present, the SIGs are in hiatus, but the task force that reviewed the issue has produced a strong piece of work and the Council intends to keep pressing for their recommendations to be acted upon.

Regional Teams

A question was raised about whether Council members are adopting consistent methods of communication with the u3as in their regions, to avoid confusion.

Sue noted that practices differ, reflecting the different histories and strengths of regions. Some have well-established regional support teams, while others do not. She emphasised the value of these teams, particularly in larger regions or where only one Council representative is in place.

Regional support teams can draw together networks, take on much of the liaison work, and provide vital capacity. For example, in the South East one representative covers nearly 200 u3as and around 88,000 members—a task impossible for one person alone. Where they exist, support teams are already proving effective, and Sue expressed confidence that they would gradually spread more widely across the movement.

Matching TAT Guidance to u3a Needs

Several Chairs reflected on the gap between national policy and the practical realities of running local u3as. While policies and procedures may look sound on paper, they are often too complex to apply in practice and can discourage volunteers from taking on roles. Committees frequently end up adapting the guidance to make it workable locally.

The plea was for more flexibility and practical support: an emphasis on sharing ideas between u3as, and on advice that helps with recruitment and member engagement. 'If we can get those things right,' one Chair said, 'the rest will follow—but it can't be imposed top-down.'

Sue Russell agreed, describing flexibility as 'the nature and strength of the movement,' provided legal requirements are met. Another Chair added a plea to 'keep it simple.' The national structure and terminology can feel overly complicated and remote, while at local level problem-solving tends to be direct and pragmatic.

Experience Sharing

The Forum also raised questions about how to retain and share the experience of volunteers. One suggestion was to create a volunteer pathway, so that former Chairs and other office holders could contribute their knowledge—possibly through regional support teams.

Concerns were also voiced about the length of terms of office. With many Chairs taking a year to find their footing, a three-year term may not give enough time for experience to be fully used. Extending terms to four years was proposed as a way of strengthening leadership continuity.

Sue acknowledged the value of these points, noting them for further discussion within the Council. While terms of office are usually set in local constitutions, she agreed this was an area worth reflecting on.

Vice-Chair Election Process

Sue Russell reported that the Council had recently discussed the Vice-chair election process. The Board's indication of a 'preferred' candidate had been widely regarded as inappropriate, and many members were unhappy with how the election was handled. She told the Forum that the Council had asked the Board to review the process in its entirety, so that confidence can be rebuilt for the future.

Participants strongly echoed this concern. One noted that signalling a preferred candidate might be common practice elsewhere but stressed that this was not how it was received by members—and the

effect had been anger and disillusionment. Several referred to online discussions where the issue had been heavily criticised.

There was particular sympathy for the two candidates who withdrew. Some Chairs felt they had been treated unfairly and denied a proper chance to stand. Sue explained that all four candidates had been given the option to continue, but two chose to step down after what they had experienced. She described this as a loss for the movement, with able and committed people discouraged from taking leadership roles.

Participants warned that unless the process is changed, future volunteers may be put off standing. As one Chair put it: 'It's hard enough to step up in the first place—if you're told you're not the preferred candidate, many people simply won't do it.' Others linked this to the wider difficulty of encouraging people to volunteer for roles across the movement.

Sue concluded by noting that the Governance Committee has undertaken to review the process.

Council and u3as

Sue Russell reflected on the positive relationships developing within the Council and with staff, acknowledging that it had taken time but was now strengthening. She shared her experience of visiting the South East Summer School in Chichester, where she spent time informally talking with delegates.

What struck her was how participants consistently said they had chosen their course because they 'knew nothing about it and wanted to learn.' The joy of discovery and the enthusiasm of members summed up for Sue what the u3a is all about.

She noted that while the Council's work sometimes feels bogged down in 'grit' and process, its real purpose is to enable the grassroots activity—the summer schools, the groups, the opportunities to learn and share.

One Chair added that the true 'root' of the movement lies with local volunteers: 'It's the people who make it happen—the Chairs and their committees. Without them, there's nothing.'

Reflection from the Chairs' Forum

One of the co-organisers reflected on the journey of the Chairs' Forum over the past two years. The idea had begun with four Chairs wanting a peer group where Chairs could talk freely about the issues that mattered to them. There had been some painful moments along the way, but the Forum had now become an established and valued space.

The purpose, they emphasised, is simple: open exchange of information and experience. It is not political, not directive, and not controlled from above—it is guided by what Chairs themselves want to discuss.

Membership now covers over 40% of u3as, with more than 350 people also connected through the Facebook group. The Forum provides notes and recordings of meetings, helping to spread the benefit of discussions more widely.

The co-organiser acknowledged a sense of repetition: many of the issues raised today had been raised two years earlier and remain unresolved. But the Forum gives weight to these concerns, with views passed on not only to the Council but also to the Board and CEO.

They expressed confidence that the Council can benefit from this input. 'u3as know what they are talking about—we know the issues, and many of us have tried different solutions. Some of those have worked really well, and we want to share our successes.'

If the Council can bring together this collective knowledge and align Trust resources with it, the co-organiser concluded, 'that will be a real success.'

Concluding Remarks

Sue closed the discussion by returning to the theme of evolution. The Council, like the Chairs' Forum itself, is still working through 'teething troubles.' Progress has taken time, but the collective enthusiasm is real, and momentum is now building towards a more settled and effective phase.

She emphasised the value of the Chairs' Forum as a resource for the Council: 'You are representing your u3a, and you can tell us what's happening locally,' saying continued input from Chairs is an important part of ensuring the Council remains grounded in the experiences of members.