Peer Support Groups Guidance

What is a peer support group?

Peer support groups are a group of u3a members who have the same responsibility/role as others. For example, Chairs, Treasurers, Groups Coordinators, Webmasters/Website Coordinators, Membership Secretaries and any other roles that are common across u3as. A peer support group could be formed across a network, Region or nationally. These groups are also sometimes called peer support networks, role-based networks or peer groups.

The purpose of peer support groups is:
- to provide mutual support to those who have the same role/responsibilities
- for members to come together (in person or online) to ask questions, solve shared challenges and share good practice
- to share knowledge and ideas amongst peers.

Peer support groups benefit from members with different amounts of experience and knowledge. For example, a peer support group will likely be beneficial to someone who has just started a role and is finding their feet, through to someone who has been in a role for several years and has experience to share or are interested in hearing about different ways they might be able to carry out their role. Whilst there is no one size fits all for peer support groups this document is intended to provide an outline of how to set up a group and ensure it is sustainable and self-managing.

Things to think about when setting up a peer support group
Membership
- It is worth checking with your network and or Regional Trustee before setting up your peer support group to make sure there isn't already another one in existence which will overlap e.g. for the same role in the same area.
- Decide how people can join the peer support group and how they will be contacted. Regional Trustees and or Network Chairs will be able to support you in sending out communications to u3as in a particular area. Peer support groups shouldn't be too large in size to enable everyone to have an opportunity to contribute and discuss.
- Agree the purpose of the peer support group and the terms of reference.

Running the peer support group
- Once there are several people interested in joining, ask members how they would like the group to be run. E.g., how often to meet, how long the meetings should be, where to meet (online or in person), how to communicate between meetings (if appropriate) and make a note of what is agreed.
- Discuss who will organise the meetings, e.g. will this be the same person, or will people take turns to do this? It is important for peer support groups to ne self-managing and to have an informal set up. They are also more likely to be sustainable if responsibility doesn't fall to one person.

Communications

- How will the contact list for the group be managed to comply with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)? For example, MailChimp is a free platform and could be used for this purpose. Beacon could also be used which would incur a cost of £1 per person/per year.
- Agree how the meeting will be run and what notes will be taken, e.g., ideas shared and challenges that were raised. However, there may be confidential aspects that should not be shared. Sharing notes can be helpful for those who were unable to attend and may also encourage others to join when they see how it could be helpful to them.
- Will there be ways for the group to keep in touch between meetings, if they are happy to be contacted in between? E.g. could someone manage a central email account that questions/challenges could be sent to and then distributed to the group if is it something that can't wait until the next meeting?

Budget

- If the group decides to meet in person and there are venue costs, how will these be covered? Perhaps it could be possible to ask a member of a different u3a to host each meeting and be responsible for these costs.
- Meeting online reduces costs and enables the geographical reach of the group to be expanded, though this decision should be reached with the group members.

Tips on keeping a peer support group going

- Peer support groups should be informal meetings which provide members with the opportunity to discuss their challenges, share learnings, ideas and experiences and connect with each other. However, it could be helpful to ask for agenda items and pull together a loose agenda for the meeting particularly if there are several who raise the same issue/challenge.
- If hosting the meeting online, depending on numbers you may want to utilise breakout groups and then bring the group back together to share what they have discussed.

Resources and support

- The u3a advice and information webpage has a wealth of information which may be helpful in answering some of the questions raised at meetings: www.u3a.org.uk/advice (You may need to set up a log in to access these documents)
- Contact your Regional Trustee, their details can be found here.
- Contact the u3a office: info@u3a.org.uk or 020 8466 6139
- Support for using Zoom
- u3a online workshops cover a range of topics, further details and information about how to book can be accessed here: www.u3a.org.uk/advice/workshops

Thank you to the u3a members who have shared their guidance and contributed to this document.