u3a
learn, laugh, live

u3a and me

The difference membership makes



The difference **membership makes**

What **more than 10,000 members** told us about learning, friendship, wellbeing and purpose in later life.

95%

of respondents say u3a has improved their life in some way.

Research and insight from the Third Age Trust.

Introduction



Understanding our collective impact

Across the movement, local u3as are enriching later life at remarkable scale. Members create the groups, share knowledge, welcome new people and nurture the communities where learning and friendship grow.

The u3a and me survey was designed to capture that experience more clearly. It explored the difference membership makes, how people take part and what can make greater involvement easier or harder.

The survey ran for six weeks in early 2026 and received 10,485 responses. For most respondents, their main involvement was through local u3a groups and activities.

This report shares the headline findings and what they suggest for the movement. It is not a technical analysis of every response. It is a member-facing summary of what people told us, and why it matters.

Research at a glance

- Member-shaped research
- 6-week online survey
- 6,400+ written comments
- 10,485 members responded

"u3a has given me a whole new lease of life, with new friends and interests."

Headline findings

Enriching later lives at scale

The findings confirm the strength and breadth of members' experience across the movement.

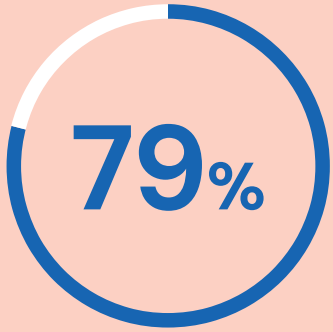
People often join to learn something new or meet others, but many describe benefits that go further. Groups and activities are the starting point. The wider experience frequently brings friendship, confidence, stimulation, routine and a stronger sense of purpose.



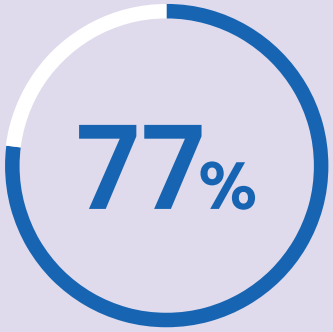
Say u3a has improved their life in some way



Say u3a gives them opportunities to keep learning and stay curious



Say u3a has expanded their social connections



Say their sense of wellbeing has improved since joining



Say u3a has helped them stay mentally and physically active



Say being part of u3a has reduced feelings of loneliness or isolation

Learning

Learning for the love of it

Nine in ten respondents said u3a gives them opportunities to keep learning and stay curious.

That reflects one of the movement's defining strengths. Learning is led by members and shaped by their interests. There are no exams or qualifications to work towards. People take part because a subject interests them, and because learning with others is enjoyable.

For some, that means trying something new. For others, it means returning to an interest set aside earlier in life. Members also bring their own knowledge into groups, often discovering that experience and enthusiasm matter as much as formal expertise.

What the findings suggest

The research shows how powerful the experience of learning can be. A u3a is so much more than a list of available groups. It's member stories that show what taking part can feel like, and where it can lead.

Key message:

Learning unlocks a livelier later life.



"I've learned new skills from dedicated, friendly people who are willing to share a lifetime's experience of something they love doing."

Friendship and belonging

Shared interests spark lasting friendships

Almost eight in ten respondents said u3a had expanded their social connections.

Friendships often grow gradually. Members see the same people each week. Conversations continue after a meeting. Familiarity builds, and shared interests become the catalyst for wider social connection.

The research also found a close relationship between belonging and reduced loneliness. Among members who strongly agreed that they felt a sense of belonging through u3a, many also reported feeling less lonely. This does not suggest that all members have experienced loneliness, or that u3a solves loneliness for everyone. It does show that, for many, belonging to u3a has made a meaningful difference.

What the findings suggest

A particular group may attract someone's initial interest. The welcome they receive will shape whether they feel able to return and become part of it.

Key message:

Shared interests make life more interesting.

"When I moved to a new area where I knew no one, joining u3a gave me a network of people, many of whom have become close friends."



Wellbeing in later life

Curiosity is key to living well in later life

More than three quarters of respondents said their sense of wellbeing had improved since joining u3a.

The survey does not show that u3a alone caused this change. It does show that members strongly associate participation with feeling better.

Learning leads to stimulation, and much more besides. Regular groups can provide rhythm and continuity. Friendships offer support during periods of change. Having something to look forward to can make a real difference.

The benefits are seen to begin early and increase over time. Among members who had belonged to u3a for less than a year, 70% reported improved wellbeing. Among those who had been members for more than ten years, the figure was 81%.



What the findings suggest

The wellbeing story is not about medical outcomes. It is about stimulation, purpose, connection and having worthwhile reasons to take part.

Key message:

Invest in your interests and get more from later life.

"u3a gives me an incentive to go out, meet like-minded people, and keep physically and mentally active."

Participation and purpose

Participation brings its own rewards

Members who gave more time to u3a tended to report stronger benefits. Those with greater involvement were more likely to describe higher confidence, greater happiness and stronger levels of mental and physical activity.

This does not mean every member should take part in the same way. The right level of involvement will vary. For one person, it may mean attending a group once a month. Another may enjoy helping at an event, sharing a skill, supporting a group or taking on a formal role.

The research suggests that participation brings the greatest value when people can contribute in ways that feel rewarding, manageable and suited to their circumstances.

Contribution as mutual exchange

Among current committee members, former committee members and those interested in committee roles, many viewed contribution as a mutual exchange rather than a duty.

That distinction matters. Volunteering can offer new relationships, confidence and purpose. It works best when people can choose a level of involvement that suits them.



"u3a gives me a chance to contribute in ways that suit my knowledge and experience, such as giving a talk to the Science Group."

Making contribution easier

From interest to involvement

A quarter of respondents said they had not yet considered joining a committee but would be open to doing so in future.

This suggests there may be more willingness across the movement than is always visible.

The research provides useful detail about what could make involvement more appealing. Members balancing caring responsibilities or limited time were more likely to value shorter and more flexible commitments. Shared roles also attracted interest, while some respondents wanted opportunities that better matched their skills.

Recognition was important to members who were unsure whether their contribution would be valued. A personal invitation also mattered, particularly where people did not know what opportunities existed.

> "I've only just joined, but the two groups I'm involved with have made me feel very welcome and encouraged me not to feel too shy to contribute."

What the findings suggest

There may be value in presenting a wider range of ways to contribute.

A clearly defined task can feel easier to consider than a broad request for help. Shared responsibilities may also make formal roles more manageable. The findings suggest that specific invitations could be particularly effective.

Instead of:

We urgently need volunteers.

A local u3a might try:

Would you be interested in helping us welcome people at one event next month?

The second version makes the task and commitment clearer. It also gives the member a chance to decide whether it suits them.

Telling the fuller u3a story

Showing what membership makes possible

Local u3as offer a remarkable range of groups and activities. That range is a major strength, but the research shows that it is only part of the story.

Prospective members may also want to understand how joining could feel and what place it might have in their life.

The findings suggest that recruitment communications can make more of the outcomes members report: continued learning, wider social connections, improved wellbeing and opportunities to contribute.

> "A list of groups does not convey the friendships that are formed within them."

From activity to experience

A list of groups tells someone what is available. A story or photograph can help them picture themselves taking part. Both are useful.

The offer:
groups and activities

The experience:
curiosity and discovery

The offer:
meeting times and venues

The experience:
welcome and connection

The offer:
ways to help

The experience:
sharing skills and feeling useful

Making the first step clearer

People considering membership may wonder whether they can attend alone, whether they need previous knowledge or what happens at a first meeting.

Clear answers can reduce uncertainty. Member stories can help too, particularly when they reflect a range of routes into u3a.

Building on a strong foundation

Where the research points next

The findings confirm that u3a is already having a substantial impact on later life. Across the movement, members report continued learning, wider social connections and improved wellbeing.

The evidence also points to ways that impact may be extended.

Prospective members may respond more strongly when communications show the experience of membership as well as the activities available. Existing members may be more willing to contribute when opportunities are clear, flexible and personally relevant.

The research also reinforces the value of welcome. A shared interest may create the first connection, but familiarity and belonging often grow through the experience around it.

These are not prescriptions. Every u3a has its own membership, character and local context. They are evidence-based prompts for local discussion and decision-making.

Five insights to build on

- Show what membership feels like, not just what is available.
- Make the first step clear for people who do not know anyone.
- Keep member stories central.
- Present contribution as flexible and rewarding.
- Use learning, friendship and wellbeing as the golden thread.

u3a is consistently improving later life at scale. This research helps make that impact visible and suggests where it could grow further.



"So much of what I do through u3a enlarges my knowledge, enriches my experiences and allows me to contribute to my local community."

About the research

About the survey

The u3a and me survey was open for six weeks in early 2026 and received 10,485 responses.

Respondents were asked about the impact of u3a on their lives, how they were involved, barriers to greater participation and what might encourage further involvement.

The findings are self-reported. They describe the experiences of members who chose to respond and should not be interpreted as clinical evidence or proof that u3a alone caused a particular outcome.

They do provide a substantial picture of the value members associate with u3a and a strong evidence base for further discussion across the movement.

For more information about the survey, contact: **impact@u3a.org.uk**

