

Witney u3a Strategic Plan 2025

Opening Statement

Witney u3a is a self-funding membership organisation, run by members for members. It is part of a UK-wide movement of over 1,000 locally-run groups for people who are not in full-time employment and who come together to learn for fun. Like all u3as, our purpose is to promote non-formal learning through self-help interest groups and activities covering a wide range of topics chosen by our members. We provide opportunities for members to learn purely for pleasure, exploring new ideas, skills, and activities together. We aim to strengthen social connections and boost wellbeing, which are key to us living better lives as we get older.

In summary, Witney is a thriving u3a. We have been steadily growing since our inception in 1989 and now have almost 800 members, over 60 interest groups, 2 speaker meetings a month and an organising committee, currently comprising 10 members. We are financially stable and have healthy reserves.

Building on our success, over the next three years, we will:

- Seek to bring greater variety, vibrancy, and flexibility into our activities;
- Broaden our appeal to a younger membership, without neglecting our longstanding members;
- Attempt to engage more fully with our local community, so that fewer people are heard to say 'what is u3a?'
- Maintain our involvement with other local u3as and the wider u3a network and where possible share knowledge, information and resources to the mutual benefit of us all;
- Ensure our new developments are guided by our members through regular consultation and ongoing communication.

1. Membership

As Witney u3a is welcoming more than 10 new members a month on average, we are content to allow it to continue to grow organically.

However, we are aware of the need to future proof the organisation by attracting more younger members and ensuring our membership is representative of the local community. We will achieve this through:

- Contact with employers' HR Departments with particular reference to employees approaching retirement;

- Articles in magazines/newspapers;
- Co-operation with other organisations, such as Age UK, Rotary, Witney Lions etc;
- Participation in volunteer fairs/charity events;
- Monthly monitoring of the membership profile;

At the same time, we will seek to maintain existing membership by:

- Continuing to make new members welcome and integrating them into the organisation;
- Establishing a buddy system through which members informally support each other to attend groups and other activities;
- Consulting with all members at least once a year to monitor their satisfaction and seek out their ideas for new developments and improvements;
- Regular emails and updates and two-way communication;
- Ensuring members are able to access the website, gain the information they need and know where to go to get their questions answered;
- Routinely monitoring people's reasons for leaving.

2. interest groups

The vast majority of Witney u3a members join so that they can participate in group activities. We will therefore maintain our level of group activity while at the same time attempting to expand it to ensure that there are more groups of the right kind to meet the needs of our growing membership. We will:

- Develop an active recruitment plan for group leaders, so that there are sufficient groups to meet demand and the range of groups reflects the interests of members;
- Take steps to ensure that group leaders are supported in their roles and feel that their importance to the organisation is recognised;
- Encourage cooperation and load sharing between groups and group leaders for example, sharing walk plans/routes, book lists, topics and themes, useful contact details and other information;
- Emphasise to all members the need for them to get involved in the development and running of groups and the importance of them being active rather than passive participants.

Going forward, Witney u3a recognises the need to break away from its traditional boundaries so we will introduce more self-organising, flexible groups such as MOTO (Members on Their Own) and MEET (Members Enjoying Events Together).

In order to broaden our appeal to younger members, we will also work with members and potential group leaders to identify new venues, leaders and activities that do not necessarily fit into the 10-12.00 noon and 2-4.00 pm model.

3. Speaker Meetings

Speaker meetings continue to be a popular opportunity for up to 200 of our members to come together, listen to a speaker, have a cup of tea, and meet up with friends. Any suggestion that they should be reduced to one a month has always been met with considerable resistance. Witney u3a will therefore continue to offer two speaker meetings a month for the time being and will shortly begin bookings for 2026/27.

However, we will also try to introduce a wider variety of events by encouraging individual members or groups of members to come forward to suggest *and organise* some additional open-to-all members activities. These could include member-led talks, quizzes, day conferences, murder mystery events (which have proved popular in the past), mock trials and debates and could, initially at least, take place on the fifth Thursday of the month when there is one.

4. Outings and Trips

Witney u3a will continue to organise group activities such as outings and trips which are open to all members. They are extremely popular and usually over-subscribed. A significant number of people sign up as members so that they can participate in them. At the moment, they are planned and delivered by one small team and represent a huge amount of time and hard work. After looking at the range of activities offered by some u3as, Witney is now keen to increase the variety of such events to include for example, theatre trips, concerts, exhibitions etc. To achieve this, we will:

- Grow our organising team so that it has enough people to take on the additional workload.
- Continue to consult with members about the sorts of activities they would like to participate in.
- Identify a limited number of extra events in 2025/26 and monitor their success
- Ensure coordination across group and other outings so that events are evenly spread throughout the calendar year.

5. Cooperation with other local u3as

Until our own groups became over-subscribed, Witney u3a cooperated with other u3as in West Oxfordshire by allowing their members to join our groups if there were spaces and if those activities were not available in their home u3a. Since this arrangement came to an end, there has been little contact with u3as in Carterton, Chipping Norton or Woodstock. After looking at other u3as, the committee has concluded that we could be missing an opportunity to learn from each other and possibly share information and resources.

During 2025/26, we will therefore extend an invitation to other West Oxfordshire u3a Chairs and members of their committees to attend an exploratory meeting aimed at identifying possible joint initiatives.

6. Liaison with other local organisations

The town of Witney is endowed with a wide range of opportunities and resources. On its updated website, and under the heading 'things to do', 'Live Well Oxfordshire' lists 123 activities and clubs within 5 miles of Witney, many aimed at people who are no longer working full time, and which could be of interest to our members.
(livewell.oxfordshire.gov.uk).

As a u3a, we are convinced that closer communication and understanding of each other's roles in our community can only be beneficial. However, gathering information and making contact with these groups in order to identify opportunities is a major project in itself. During 2025/26, Witney u3a therefore plans to agree the parameters of the project and identify a member or volunteer willing to take the work forward for us.

7. Organisation

Witney u3a is organised by a committee of up to 12 people. At present there are 10 members and one co-opted member. One member is due to stand down from their role at the AGM in July 2025 and their post is being advertised. Every committee member works extremely hard and is committed to making Witney u3a the best that it can be. They have high hopes for the future and are agreed that in order to fulfil our ambitions we will need to:

a. Increase committee support:

- Build small teams to support each area of activity so that no one committee member feels entirely responsible and always has somebody to back them up.
- Add in some additional 2nd tier roles, notably around PR and our links with the wider community. While important, the role holders need not necessarily be on the committee
- Engage more with group leaders, enlisting their help and support – formalise their Group Leader meetings, offering lunch and workshops.

b. Make the website central to our u3a:

- Engage everyone with the website so that it becomes the main source of information for all members and prospective members. Make presentations at the AGM and Group Leader meetings to 'bring it to life'!

c. Tighten up our administration:

- Consider establishing an admin 'office' with an admin manager, either virtual or real, to co-ordinate all administration and be the main point of contact for members.
- Re-establish a phone number and workable mobile phone that can be diverted to a volunteer administrator.
- Agree and advertise contact times along with the number, so that an immediate response is not expected.
- Introduce the equivalent of a comprehensive, one year plan showing all planned activities and contact details and establish a rule that new events cannot be organised unless the leader has checked that it doesn't conflict with existing plans.

d. Maintain links with wider u3a:

- Continue to participate in the Chairs' Forum, The Thames Valley Network and the SE Region u3a, if necessary, identifying an individual committee member to take on the 'link' role.

This Strategic Plan will form the basis of Witney u3a Committee's work over the coming year and will be reviewed and updated at its committee meetings. A full report on progress will be presented to the AGM in 2026

May 2025.