

**Submission from the Third Age Trust to the Economic Affairs Committee Inquiry:  
Preparing for an Ageing Society**

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**Introduction**

1. The Third Age Trust is the national body supporting the u3a movement (formerly the University of the Third Age) across the UK. With over 1,000 u3as and 400,000 members, we facilitate peer-led learning, social engagement, and volunteering opportunities for older adults, enabling them to remain active, connected, and engaged.
2. Given the majority of u3a members are no longer in full-time work, it may appear surprising that we are writing a submission to an inquiry that has at its heart a focus on the workforce and economic productivity. The reason is that the key to preparing for an ageing society is to improve health. This was stated by Profs Scott and Goodhart at the end of their evidence session on 22 April. And your first witness, Prof Sarah Harper, said that one of the ways in which to prepare for an ageing population is to support people to age well.
3. This submission therefore highlights the vital role u3as play in supporting people to live healthier, more fulfilling lives. This not only means that they continue to give back to their communities as they age (e.g. via volunteering and informal care) but also reduce the burden on the health and social care system. We therefore urge the Committee when thinking about policies necessary to adapt to future trends, that you consider the important role of non-formal learning models such as u3a.

**Evidence for the effectiveness of u3a model to promote healthy ageing**

4. We have pleasure in directing you to our latest report – [Learn to Live](#) – which underscores the importance of a low-cost, non-formal learning model for maintaining wellbeing, cognitive resilience, and social participation in later life. Evidence consistently shows that staying socially connected, mentally stimulated, and physically active contributes to longer, healthier lives.
5. The u3a model directly supports these outcomes through:
  - **Non-formal lifelong learning:** Members engage in peer-led education, acquiring new skills and keeping mentally active.

- **Social connection and volunteering:** Regular participation in u3a activities combats social isolation and fosters community ties. All members are active volunteers.
- **Active citizenship:** Many u3as collaborate with local schools, libraries, businesses and councils, making valuable contributions to their local communities.
- **Health and well-being activities:** u3a groups include walking, dancing, tai chi, and other exercise-based activities that encourage physical and mental fitness.

6. The following extracts from the Learn to Live report summarise the evidence for the importance and benefits of lifelong learning for health:

- Existing international frameworks and strategies universally recognise late-life learning opportunities as crucial for active and health ageing. Lifelong learning is now recognised as being the fourth pillar of active ageing by the World Health Organisation, alongside health, participation and security.<sup>1</sup>
- Older people's wellbeing, social connectedness, and physical and mental health may all improve as a result of lifelong learning.<sup>2</sup>
- There are many studies pointing towards the benefits of non-formal learning for health and wellbeing in later life, including those that have specifically looked at the u3a model.<sup>3 4 5 6 7</sup>

7. Some studies have also compared health outcomes of u3a members to non-members. u3a members in Australia demonstrated higher levels of healthy behaviour and self-rated health than non-u3a members.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, a review concluded that many studies show that members compare well to non-members in terms of cognitive skills and general health.<sup>9</sup>

8. The hybrid and diverse nature of non-formal learning, and the u3a model in particular, makes it challenging to define and study, and as yet there is no rigorous synthesised review of the evidence. As the [Learn to Live](#) report highlights, there is a need for such a review, as well as health economics research to demonstrate the value of the u3a model for delivering savings in health and social care.

9. The u3a movement has been growing for over 40 years now and its success is testament to the power of non-formal learning to support an active and vibrant later life. The [Learn to Live](#) report reflects our commitment to sharing the benefits of non-formal learning and calls for greater recognition and resources to enable access for everyone who could benefit. Our findings demonstrate that fostering lifelong learning and social connections combats social isolation, strengthens

community resilience, and supports mental and physical health. Furthermore, by supporting older adults to maintain their health and independence, u3as contribute to delaying the need for formal health and social care, helping to reduce NHS and social care costs.

## **Policy Recommendations**

10. Despite strong evidence for the benefits of late-life learning (e.g. cognitive stimulation, social engagement and inclusion), it is rarely integrated into ageing-related policies and programmes and is largely underfunded.<sup>10</sup>
11. To better prepare for an ageing society, we urge this Committee to consider the following policy recommendations:
  - **Recognise and support non-formal learning initiatives** like u3a as an essential part of healthy ageing strategies.
  - **Invest in community-led programmes**, such as u3a, that promote social inclusion and active lifestyles, reducing loneliness and associated health risks.
  - **Encourage partnerships between u3as and health providers and research institutions** to build an evidence base to demonstrate the impact of non-formal learning on promoting health and wellbeing.
  - **Ensure digital inclusion for older adults**, enabling access to online learning and engagement.

## **Conclusion**

12. An ageing society presents challenges, but it also offers opportunities to harness the experience, skills, and contributions of older people. The u3a movement demonstrates that non-formal learning is not just beneficial but essential for keeping people healthier, engaged, and independent for longer. The Government should recognise and integrate these approaches into ageing policies to create a more sustainable and economically resilient society.
13. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence for this important inquiry or discuss these recommendations in greater detail.

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## References

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