

BGA CLUB MANAGEMENT GUIDES

Supporting New Club Members

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Supporting new club members

1. Why Welcoming New Members Matters

Membership retention should be easier than recruiting new members. It is one of the biggest and often the most overlooked ways clubs can improve long-term sustainability. Membership recruitment and retention is consistently the most requested topic at the annual club development conference, and for good reason.

Clubs often focus heavily on selling trial lessons and first flights, but the real opportunity lies in retaining the members we already have.

Efforts to support retention should begin from the moment someone joins. Most people who leave, do so within their first year – often long before their first renewal. Yet members who stay into a second year are far more likely to stay for many years, eventually becoming instructors, maintainers, and club leaders. Your replacement might be joining the club next month!

A gliding club is, at its core, a social endeavour: a group of people drawn together by their shared passion for gliding, and where each individual's demeanour contributes to the atmosphere. Sometimes, the best measure of a club's health is as simple as noticing how easily people smile.

For a new member, their new gliding club can feel daunting: busy, unfamiliar, lots of strange jargon and unspoken norms of behaviour, almost like arriving on a new planet! What they need is early support to help them develop a sense of belonging. At this stage feeling welcomed, seen and included is more important than how often someone flies.

In short, helping people feel part of their club early safeguards the future of the sport – if we fail the newer glider pilots, we are failing the sport that we all care so much about.

The good news is getting better at member retention doesn't require big changes, just small, intentional actions shared across the club.

1.1. Myth: "Welcoming new members means more work"

Not necessarily. Done well, welcoming is less about doing more, and more about doing the ordinary things with new people in mind.

It's about:

- Saying hello
- Explaining what's happening
- Remembering a name
- Offering a small way to join in

These things don't take extra time, they just require some attention. When spread across the whole club, no one person ends up carrying the load.

Welcoming new members is a shared culture, not a special project

2. Understanding the New Member Experience

New members often arrive enthusiastic, curious and unsure of how things work. An active airfield can be an intense environment. Safety is critical, and for those who are new, there can be a fear of getting it wrong.

Gliding clubs can be challenging to navigate, both practically and socially. Without clear points of contact, many people won't ask for help. They may just stop coming, fading quietly from the club, perhaps remembered only vaguely by the few people they spoke to during their visits.

Those first few visits are critical for shaping whether someone begins to feel they belong. At the same time, many established members are managing volunteer fatigue and may be hesitant to take on more. So the question becomes: how do we welcome new members in a way that is simple, sustainable, and improves retention?

It begins with understanding what new members need, and how they absorb information. Early on, most people are both enthusiastic and easily overwhelmed. That's why this pack proposes a slightly counterintuitive approach: a welcome that doesn't try to explain everything at once.

Instead, it recommends a paced, multi-format approach:

- A welcome letter with links to further information for those who want everything *now*
- A small physical welcome pack (which may include a few items and a printed intro)
- A series of brief, automated weekly emails to drip feed key information
- A one-to-one welcome chat with an instructor or club volunteer

People learn and process information in different ways, so using a variety of methods helps meet more people where they are. For example:

- Written materials
- Videos
- Conversations with club members
- Hands-on experience

There's another important consideration. Gliding is a special interest activity, and as such is attractive to people who are neurodivergent in some way. Some will experience rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD), a heightened sensitivity to perceived rejection, especially in unfamiliar environments.

For these individuals, the first few interactions can shape whether they feel psychologically safe in the club. This is why inclusive, welcoming communication is vital. It's not about formalising friendliness, it's about ensuring that new members feel they are included from the start, rather than needing to prove themselves before they are fully accepted.

Often, it begins with something simple: a friendly hello from an established member, a quick check that someone knows where they're going, or an invitation to join in. These small moments can have a major positive impact and, collectively, they make a real difference to retention.

3. Building Belonging: Three Key Ingredients

The clubs that do best at retaining members tend to get three things right early on: clarity, connection, and contribution. These don't require major resources, but they do require a shared awareness that new members are watching, learning, and wondering whether they belong.

3.1. Clarity

New members are often unsure of what's expected, where to go, or who to speak to. Clear, friendly information, offered before they have to ask, can reduce anxiety and help them feel confident about joining in.

- Make it easy to understand what to do, where to go, who to talk to
- Provide a sheet summarising who is who and how to contact them
- Clear information helps reduce anxiety and builds early confidence

3.2. Connection

The sooner someone feels like they've met a few friendly faces, the more likely they are to return. It doesn't take much, often just a sense that someone has noticed them and is glad they're here.

- Introduce people to others - especially peers or someone who joined recently
- Include new members in conversations, making introductions as needed
- Small interactions can make a big difference in feeling seen

3.3. Contribution

Being able to help, even in a small way, helps each new member feel useful, included, and part of something. In the early days, simple low-pressure tasks allow people to join in without needing experience.

- Give new members small ways to take part: washing gliders, helping at the launch point, coming with you to fetch the batteries, parachutes, buckets etc so they see where equipment is stored
- This builds identity and connection without pressure

When all three elements are present, new members are more likely to feel confident, connected, and committed within their first few months.

4. Three Phases of Welcoming

Welcoming is a process that unfolds over time and helps new members to settle in, feel supported and to stay engaged. This is about developing their sense of belonging. The language that is used is important as often it's the little tells that show whether a person is really part of the group, or still an outsider. Inclusive language will refer to them as an existing, current member for instance saying 'our club'.

A good welcome has three key phases:

1. Immediate action after joining
2. A gradual flow of useful information
3. Ongoing support during the first few months

This section outlines simple, low-effort ways to create continuity and connection across those early stages of membership.

4.1. Phase 1: Actions to Take Early (First Few Days)

The first 24-72 hours after someone joins are critical. This is when new members are most open, and most uncertain. A few small, timely actions can go a long way toward helping them feel noticed and welcome.

Suggested actions include:

- Give them a nicely presented members' pack, which includes a logbook & training card
- Add them to the club systems, including all the communication channels
- Send a welcome email or letter with links to essential information; initiate the welcome email sequence (see next section)
- Set up a short welcome chat and show round with an instructor to discuss their flying aspirations and their next steps
- Make introductions to friendly faces, especially peers or recent joiners
- Invite them to a low-key club event or informal catch-up
- Offer a small way to get involved right away (e.g. helping on the ground)

The aim here is to show them that someone has seen them, and that they matter, not just as a number, but as part of the club.

4.2. Phase 2: Supporting Learning Through Drip Feeding Information

New members don't need to know everything immediately. Too much information too soon can feel overwhelming. Instead, aim to drip feed information over time, in small, relevant chunks. The goal is to create a steady sense of support, not to overwhelm.

This could include:

- A short series of automated weekly emails (the 'Welcome Email Sequence')
- Clear signposting to resources (e.g. booking instructions, training pathway)
- Pointers from instructors or club members during regular conversations
- Encouragement to ask questions or seek clarification

This approach allows people to build confidence gradually and is particularly helpful for those who are neurodivergent. A separate guide is available to help clubs set up a simple new member email sequence, with suggested wording and scheduling periods.

4.3. Phase 3: Ongoing Support (First Few Months)

Beyond the first few weeks, the focus shifts to helping new members stay engaged and begin to find their rhythm. This doesn't need to be intensive: just consistent, thoughtful contact.

- Follow up if someone hasn't been around
- Track whether they've flown again or made progress in training
- Make sure they know how to book flying and who to talk to
- Offer gentle invitations to socials, working parties, or small volunteer roles
- Talk to them! Ask how they're finding things; what's working, what's unclear

People are more likely to stay if they feel they're making progress, even in small ways. That might be their second flight, a chance to help at the launch point, or simply having a few familiar faces around them.

4.4. Phase 4: 6 month and then annual check-ins

Ongoing contact helps turn the early welcome into a lasting connection.

Each year, all club members should be given the opportunity to discuss their aspirations and ongoing training needs. These chats also give the opportunity to encourage people into new or varied volunteering roles, whether informal or a named role.

5. Integration into the club's training system

The main reason why people join a gliding club is to learn to fly and one of the swiftest ways to feel part of the club is to be heard. This is why a chat with someone from the instructor team at a very early stage is so important.

Types of training on offer at a club:

- Flying; ground theory; and air
- Simulator
- Ground handling

Instructors often invest considerable emotional energy into teaching people to fly and developing them into pilots. They naturally find it hard if the person chooses to leave after going solo. For many instructors, the way to protect themselves is to wait until they are shown that someone is serious about learning to glide before committing to supporting them. This creates a threshold that the new member must meet before feeling accepted. None of this is spoken about, but the subliminal exclusion and lack of belonging is felt by the new member.

Key principles: the needs of all club members matter and need to be balanced; instructors are club members too

Let's not forget, for some new members, going solo is their goal, perhaps because they don't know what lies beyond. But perhaps that really is the limit of their ambition before they move onto their next activity or challenge. Finding this out at an early stage is important.

One of the ways to resolve this potential point of unspoken conflict of (nearly healthy self) interest is to talk about it! Find out what their aspirations are. Explain to new members the world of gliding beyond solo to light a fire. Set and manage their expectations about what they need to invest in terms of time and effort to achieve their goals. Explain for the first time about the breadth and depth of coaching and training skills on offer at your club, how the instructor team works and who is who. Much of this information won't sink in so supply just enough (this will vary depending by individual) and expect to need to repeat it. This is the beginning of a long term relationship. It might be that their stated ambition remains to go solo and then leave, which is useful information for the instructors who can reserve their deep emotional investment accordingly.

Ideal elements of the discussion:

- Find out what motivated them to join the club
- Find out their aspirations
- Explain how flying training works and what they would need to do achieve their aspirations (managing expectations, as required)
- Give an overview of training resources (books, online, videos etc)

- Give an overview of the pilot development pathway and some of the possibilities beyond solo, as well as the range of coaching skills amongst the club's instructor & coaching team
- Explain who they should go to if they have issues and need support
- Make sure they are shown around the club and get to meet some of their peers

What happens after that depends on your club's training systems, but the key is that the new member becomes part of it immediately.

Ideally these pilot development discussions will happen at key stages of development and for more established pilots perhaps annually. Everyone should be encouraged to express their aspirations for the coming season and to be able to discuss their training needs.

5.1. Resources

This meeting might be the place that the physical membership pack gets handed over. In it might be:

- Log book
- Training card(s)
- The summary of the types of training available
- Whos' who at the club
- How our club works
- Guide to joining in and getting support
- A map of the airfield and club buildings
- Anything else appropriate for your club

These resources will also do well as part of the gentle weekly emails. They could be supplied in both places, as long as it isn't too overwhelming for the new person. Whatever works well at your club will be the right mix.

6. Good Practice Without Extra Burden

Creating a welcoming experience doesn't have to mean taking on extra roles or setting up new schemes. In most clubs, it's about building a shared awareness that *"this is how we do things round here."*

That phrase *'how we do things round here'* is a simple way of thinking about your club's informal brand. It's what people notice, feel, and internalise when they spend time at the airfield. New members pick it up fast: whether they feel welcome, overlooked, included, or inconveniently in the way.

The good news is that small, consistent actions go a long way, and they're easier to sustain than big new initiatives. For instance:

- Encourage all members to take responsibility for helping people settle in. A quick hello or offer of help creates connection without effort.
- Use simple automation (like an email sequence) to make welcome consistent, especially when key volunteers are busy or unavailable.
- Make the most of people who naturally enjoy talking to newcomers as they are often the best ambassadors.
- Include newcomers in everyday routines: daily briefings, glider washing, breaktime conversations, and shared tasks.

- Reinforce the culture with low-key reminders – like a sign in the clubhouse that says “New faces welcome. Introduce yourself” (or somesuch)

Welcoming doesn’t need to be formalised; it just needs to be intentional. The best approach is one that spreads the responsibility across the club and reflects the club’s style. If the unspoken message is *“this is how we do things round here”*, then make sure it’s something new members want to be part of.

Healthy Welcoming

To keep things simple, here are a few things that help, and a few that might unintentionally send the wrong message.

Do	Don’t
Say hello to new faces, especially if no one else is nearby	Assume “someone else will welcome them”
Introduce them to one or two people (not a whole committee!)	Leave them sitting alone with no context
Offer a small, achievable way to get involved	Overwhelm them with jobs or jargon
Use simple, friendly signage to explain what’s what	Put up aggressive signs telling people what <i>not</i> to do
Let them know it’s okay to ask questions - even more than once	Make them feel foolish for not already knowing how things work
Share what <i>you</i> enjoy about the club, it helps build rapport	Talk only about rules, forms, or fees
Include them in your conversation	Let the conversation be dominated by speculation/gossip around serious accidents
Invite feedback or ideas, it shows you’re open to improvement	Dismiss their early impressions with “that’s just how it is”

Even one or two thoughtful interactions in those early visits can shape someone’s entire view of your club. It doesn’t take much, but it does make a difference.

7. Linked resources

There are documents for sharing with new members on the BGA website.

8. Final Thoughts

At its best, a gliding club is much more than a place to fly; it's a living system of sport, volunteering, and community. Belonging is what binds those elements together, and it's often the deciding factor in whether someone stays for a season or for a lifetime.

The most effective way to strengthen your club's future is to help more people stay – not just through systems and structures, but through simple human connection. Welcoming isn't a single job or a formal role. It's a shared way of being that tells new members: *you matter here*.

Whether your club welcomes five or twenty new members this year, the principle remains the same: small, timely acts of attention create momentum. Inclusive, intentional welcoming helps new members move from "visitor" to "belonging", and that's when people start to give back, stick around, and shape the future alongside you.

This guide is designed to support you, not to add pressure, but to offer practical, pragmatic steps and encouragement. Take what works for your club. Try something small, and trust that it's worth it – when new members thrive, your club does too.