



Editor's Welcome

Welcome to a rather belated Beacon News. I'm afraid this should have appeared weeks ago, but forces conspired to prevent this from being ready on time. It is our intention that Beacon News should appear monthly — but that depends on our readers. We do need to hear from you. How has Beacon helped your U3A? What hints and tips can you share with the community of Beacon users?

We'd also love to have letters from Beacon users, or even from those who don't currently use Beacon. Please send your contributions to news@beacon.u3a.org.uk.

Beacon Upgrade Task Force

*Sam Mauger, CEO of the Third Age Trust, gives
an update to Beacon News*

The Beacon Upgrade Group has used the considerable feedback from users and non users of Beacon to write a Request for Information document (RFI). The RFI was approved by the Board of Trustees this month. The RFI has been sent to a number of companies that have been suggested to the working group and we hope to receive responses by 7th June. The responses will be considered and will provide us with further information which we will include as we begin to draft a Beacon specification.

The working group has also sent the RFI document to the Beacon Team, the focus group participants and the Beacon Independent Group contacts for their thoughts and feedback. In June we will be able to give more information as we begin to receive feedback from RFI responses.

STOP PRESS

The Beacon Upgrade Group have now begun the process of evaluating the responses received to the request for information. The group will be meeting throughout June to discuss the responses and consider the potential solutions offered



Beacon Upgrade Focus Groups

Beacon cannot possibly hope to continue meeting the needs of U3As unless the Beacon Upgrade Working Group and the developers know what those needs are. Groups of Beacon users have been meeting in various locations around the country to discuss the way their U3As operate, how they use Beacon and what they'd like Beacon to help with in the future.

Three focus groups met. Each meeting was in a different location and with a focus on a specific area of U3A management and Beacon. The three topics were membership; finance and web/social media. Beacon users were allocated to one of the meetings depending on their location and area of expertise.

The objectives of the focus groups were as follows:

- To explore the strengths and weaknesses of the existing system
- To elicit requirements for an upgraded system
- To improve understanding of the ways in which U3As work at a local level
- To gather ideas on how the upgraded system can be made accessible.
- To ensure stakeholders are engaged in the process

The meetings were structured, but participants were given free rein if they wanted to take the discussion in a direction that

hadn't been envisaged by the group organisers. This approach meant that the topics considered important by the Beacon Upgrade Working Group were explored fully, but so, too, were areas that Beacon users considered to be important but may have been overlooked by the working group.

It would have been impractical to have tried to keep an accurate written record of such free-flowing meetings on the day, so the meetings were recorded. The messages from the participants was distilled into a summary what was used to inform the Request for Information (RfI) and, ultimately, the direction that Beacon will take.

Keep in Touch

To keep up to date with the latest Beacon developments then make sure you visit <https://beacon.u3a.org.uk>, not least because of the excellent training materials on the site.

To find out what other Beacon users are up to, the problems they face and how they've resolved them, use the forum at forum.u3abeacon.org.uk.

And make sure you read, and pass on, Beacon News.

We want to hear from you: letters, tips, your experience with Beacon - anything that a Beacon user would find interesting. Send it to the address below.

Beacon Tip

Each month we'd like to print a simple tip for making Beacon easier to use. When you want to find a member's record there's no need to scroll through the entire database.

Search by name, street, town, postcode, telephone, membership no (Full or partial matches)

You can see from the popup tip above that the quick search box can find a member by name, street, town, postcode, phone number or membership number. It even allows you to search on just part of one of those.

Useful!



What the Focus Groups Said – Membership and Groups

The focus group conversations were wide-ranging and represented many different viewpoints. A few of the points raised are printed below. More from the focus groups will follow next month.

Please note that these comments may not have represented the views of the focus group as a whole, and certainly cannot be taken as commitments for Beacon Upgrade. They will, however, be considered when the detailed specification is prepared.

The focus groups feedback on membership and groups included the following points.

Different U3As have different membership rules. Some allow a reduced fee for those joining part way through the membership year. Others offer joint membership for partners or address sharers; some offer a reduced amount for the second person; some make no concession at all.

There could be benefits if Beacon captured more information about members such as their skills, interests and how they were referred to the U3A.

Social media and the online world are increasingly used to look for things to do in retirement. New U3A members are used to computers and expect to do things online. That includes joining a U3A and renewing their membership.

Renewals should have more automation.

Better management of group finances is needed. Groups may

have their own subscription. A U3A needs oversight of groups' income and expenditure, but groups must continue to be able to use their group's money for their own purposes.

Some U3As have groups that are resistant to using technology, and for that or other reasons do not communicate effectively with the U3A. Beacon may be able to help overcome these difficulties.

Beacon Users' Forum

Peer support is normal for software these days, and Beacon is no exception. Support by the user community suits the U3A ethos perfectly. The Beacon Users' Forum (forum.u3abeacon.org.uk) is the vehicle for this.

The forum's hot topics at the moment are:

- The reason why mail sent by Beacon contains a message about the return address
- The recent RfI
- Problems sending email to certain addresses

If you need help with Beacon then a search on the forum may provide the answer. If not, then ask a question. Helpful people will ensure that you get the help you need.



RFI Issued

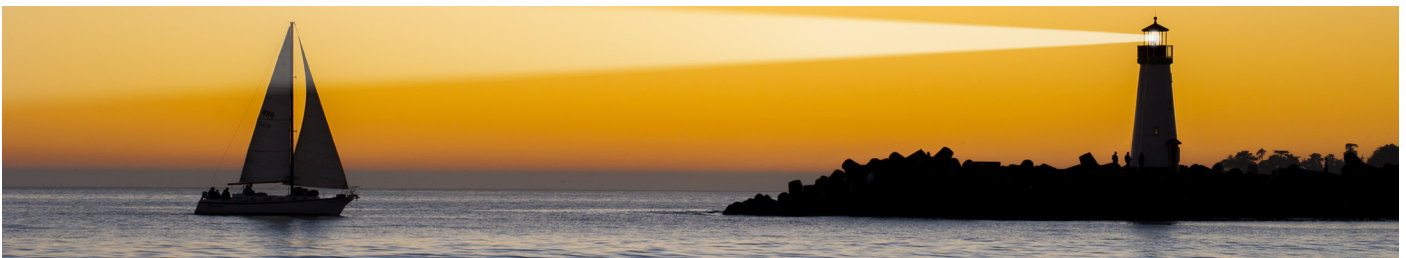
As Sam Mauger told us on the front page, the Request for Information (RFI) has been sent to potential suppliers of the Beacon Upgrade. The purpose of the document is to quickly narrow the search for a partner by providing them with an overview of the U3A movement and the key requirements that need to be addressed in any future U3A

management system.

The RFI does not go into detail – that comes later – but is wide ranging, covering areas such as the ability to extract analytics from the system, the need for a responsive design that works as well on a phone or tablet as on a computer, accessibility and the importance of being integrated with public-facing sites. The

vendors are also told that they will need to address the migration of existing Beacon data.

The replies from the vendors should have been received by the time you read this. Let's hope that we receive positive responses from vendors and that we can move to the next stage, the formal Invitation to Tender.



Beacon People — Stephen Shipley

In late 2015 I went (with my then Chair and my Network Co-ordinator) to see a Beacon presentation. We agreed that we liked the sound of Beacon and I felt that I could kick our aged Excel spreadsheets into the defined layout. The spreadsheet wrangling turned out to be a little more complex than I had expected, but in the end the data was ready to be uploaded and give us our brand new Beacon site ready to use. In Spring 2016 I offered my services to Lesley Asman to help other U3As “fight their way through the data jungle”. And so the Migration Team was formed.

At the time there were about 60 active Beacon sites and we have now just topped 300. At first my role involved checking converted spreadsheets and offering U3As

software tools to help with the conversion. We have had some changes along the way. In late 2017/early 2018, the Migration Team was augmented by another three migrators (so I haven't done 240 single-handed!). Also, the task confronting a prospective Beacon U3A has eased with the development of a team of supporters and the availability of software tools to make the job easier. Current restructuring in the Beacon team is aimed at helping us to focus our support effort at various stages in the “Beacon journey” and to almost completely remove the need for any data reformatting work by U3As.

Of all the U3As who have submitted data for checking, the magnificent total of only two were totally error-free when they were

presented. We understand that data checking is a very demanding discipline so we are very pleased to do everything we can to reduce the extent to which this sits on the shoulders of prospective Beacon users.

I live in the south-west of England from September to May and in the south-west of France from May to September. Fortunately, the vast majority of what I do is done online so this lifestyle does not get in the way of my Beacon work.

Stephen Shipley, Crewkerne U3A

(We are grateful to Stephen for writing this for us, and also for the work he's done for Beacon over the years. Would you like to tell us your story? Or that of a colleague? Please send it to news@beacon.u3a.org.uk)