u3a Beacon

BEACON *NEWS*

Edition: 28   July – August 2022

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The purpose of this bi–monthly newsletter is to provide useful information to our Beacon Users.

Message from Beacon National Support Lead

We have had a busy year, working on the speed of Beacon, delivering enhancements and responding to support requests from users. Looking at our support ticket system I can see that out of the 517 u3as on Beacon we have around two or three support requests a day. These range from; I am not sure how to questions , to; I think I have broken something and, I would like you to reset something. Unraveling the "I think I have broken something can be interesting" and generally results in a short training session with nothing broken. Generally, queries are answered within 3 hours. We have increased the speed of Beacon over the last six months by reducing the database enquiry times. With the system running well we are taking the opportunity to introduce enhancements, many requested by you. The next big changes coming down the line, are an improvement in recording gift aid eligibility and individual donations plus the change in the method of logging into the Members Portal, moving away from the five pieces of personal information to Username and Password. We will be publishing the details of how this will work over the next month in preparation for the changeover. Please don't forget that if there is anything that you want to know about Beacon, just ask. We are happy to help.

Frank Bailey

FURTHER INFORMATION

Beacon Enhancements and the Beacon Team

When plans for a Beacon replacement were put on hold last year investment in the current Beacon was re-ignited. The Beacon infrastructure and code have been maintained by Siftware since not long after Beacon was written. While Siftware understand the technology behind Beacon, they obviously have no experience of running a u3a. As a part of the Beacon Team of volunteers, the Enhancements Team was established to specifically guide Siftware at a detailed level.

Much of the work to date has been upgrading the underlying Beacon infrastructure to keep it current (important for security) as well as scaling Beacon to support 500 and beyond u3as. This included updating the database and system software and migrating to a more flexible hosting platform. While this went on longer than expected Beacon is now stable and more responsive with those Cloudflare timeouts becoming a rare event.

All of this means that functional enhancements have been fewer to date than we hoped. The majority have been quite minor – fixing some annoying gremlins or have been about compliance such as introducing cookie management. Some have been more visible changes include the "Help" icon, more comprehensive downloads, more sorting options and of course Demotown refreshes.

So what do members of the Enhancements Team do?

- Maintain an Enhancement list of Beacon issues and propose priorities

- Monitor Siftware progress at the day-to-day level

- Review progress and broad priorities with the Trust

- Investigate issues raised by u3as through the Help Desk and the Forum

- For agreed developments write specifications for Siftware to code from with the aim of reducing the amount of reworking needed

- Test, where possible, Siftware releases

- Schedule and monitor releases, including communicate to u3as when applicable.

Looking at testing specifically then in the past year or so over 30 separate releases have been tested by the Team. In specification creation there are over 50 ranging from deployed enhancements to early drafts.

Graham Tigg
Migration and Software Specification Lead

Beacon Demotown Site

We call Beacon demonstration sites, used to try out Beacon or for training, Demotown.

We have refreshed Demotown again with most of the fictitious members having a renewal date of 1st October. While the member and group data is similar, the financial transaction have been updated to use the Membership and Current accounts in tandem.

It is free.

Why Bother? Well, it provides a safe and comfortable place for your users to try things out and to be trained. As it is totally separate from your live data site there is no danger if they get it wrong, and they can gain confidence in the "safe" environment.

Our future training scheme will be using a duplicate of this site so if you want to check something after a training session you will see the same data and configuration.

A polite request, this message is only for those **without** a demotown or demoton site.

We have a plan to extend it to all sites in time. I would caution that we have a very small team doing this work so please be patient. We will do this strictly to our schedule and to order.

If you don't have a demoton / demotown, to join our list please email info@beacon.u3a.org.uk with:

- Your u3a name
- You Site admin name
- Your site admin email
- Thanks for your co-operation with this plan

John Alexander
Documentation and Training Lead

Beacon for Networks

The South Wales Network (SWN) successfully implemented Beacon for Networks in May 2022 after a short training session with a member of the Beacon team and a couple of weeks 'playing' with the demonstration package.

Prior to this our SWN Contacts were held on an Excel spreadsheet by our Secretary who was responsible for adding and updating our contacts and sending out all communications.

Beacon for Networks is an on-line database so those who have been given access (just the SWN Officers) by the SWN's System Administrator can access the database to add, amend and send out emails to our Contacts.

We designate each contact with a description of our choice eg Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Network Contact etc. This not only allows us to contact everyone on our database, but also to select and contact just one of these designations. For Study Days, attendees are added to a Study Day Group allowing us to contact the whole Group or selected members of the Group.

The Finance function handles our day to day finances such as membership, venue hire etc. and individual events such as Study Days.

If your Network hasn't looked at Beacon for Networks then I recommend that you do it now. The demonstration will cost you nothing and implementing Beacon for Networks will also cost you nothing! What have you got to lose?

Derek Shottin

Chairman, South Wales Network

Beacon Terms and Conditions

Following the recent issue of Beacon Terms and Conditions a number of u3as asked for clarity on Site Administrator's position. The Trust's advice is as follows:

If there is person who is currently responsible for Beacon who is not on the committee, we recommend they are co-opted to the committee and that they attend at least once a year to report on their role. The strong advice is that anyone dealing with member data is on the committee, so they can benefit from the Trust's trustee indemnity insurance. It is the committee responsibility to ensure that the admin (and anyone dealing with personal   data) is aware of their requirements under GDPR and confidentiality. In both cases, the u3a is recommended to appoint a nominated data protection officer to support safe and proper data handling within the u3a generally.

The Trust provides information on GDPR under our "Support for u3as" tab on the website, and a model template (you will need to log in):
https://www.u3a.org.uk/advice.

It also offers a "Keeping It Legal" workshop which also covers GDPR:
https://www.u3a.org.uk/advice/workshops.

Alison May
Head of Member Services

Please note:

If you have further queries around data protection please contact the advice team on info@u3a.org.uk.

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Beacon User Acceptance Testing

We are continuing to work with our software developers (Siftware) to enhance Beacon with new and improved features. All of these require testing by experienced Beacon users to ensure they meet the specifications and required functionality.

We are looking to expand the user testing team who can help with this testing. If you can help with this and for more information, please contact **Gary Nye** at gary.nye@beacon.u3a.org.uk.

COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

Who we are and what we do

Name	Role
Neil Stevenson	Team Leader
Tony Darbyshire	Webmaster
Malcolm Tulip	Newsletter & Website Support

Beacon CommunicationsTeam

Neil Stevenson
Team Leader

Malcolm Tulip
Newsletter &
Website Support

Tony Darbyshire
Webmaster

BEACON WEBSITE

Beacon is a management system designed by u3as, for u3as. It provides a simple interface for managing members, groups and finances. Beacon is available to all u3as in the UK that wish to take advantage of it. More information about Beacon can be found through the link to the website.

The members of the editorial team are as follows:

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