U3A Beacon *News*

Welcome

This is the first of what will be a regular newsletter for everybody interested in Beacon, the U3A's integrated membership, groups, finance and mailing system. Its aim is to keep U3As informed of news about Beacon; to provide hints and tips, news about the Beacon Upgrade project and profiles of some of the people who work behind the scenes to make Beacon a success.

We welcome feedback on any aspect of Beacon or Beacon News. Email us at news@beacon.u3a.org.uk.

Beacon Marches On

What – apart from sharing the U3A ethos of lifelong learning and mutual aid – do 292 U3As, from Abingdon to Yate and Sodbury, have in common? They all use Beacon. About 45 percent of U3A members have their details stored safely in Beacon, simplifying administration and helping their U3As to comply with GDPR data protection requirements.

Beacon has grown rapidly. The first user was Aylsham in 2015, and the newest member of the Beacon family is Pontyclun. Croeso i Beacon.

Beacon is supporting U3As of all sizes, from 61 members to a whopping 2390. Geographically, Beacon stretches the length and breadth of the UK (and beyond). From Guernsey in the south to Perth in the north; from Lowestoft in the east to Preseli, St. Austell and Bushmills in the west. Beacon is everywhere, and looks set to go from strength to strength as new U3As sign up and the exciting Beacon Update approaches.

If you're not yet on Beacon, then contact the team: info@beacon.u3a.org.uk.

Live Beacon U3As shown in Google Maps

The navigation bar of the new Beacon website at https://beacon.u3a.org.uk

Beacon Website Up and Running

At the top of this page you'll see the navigation bar and address of Beacon's new website. The website is a one stop shop containing everything a Beacon user, or somebody who'd thinking of joining the Beacon family, needs to know.

If you want to find out more about Beacon, get help, read about how other U3As are using Beacon or access the system itself then this will be the easiest way to do it.

The site is still a work in progress and will not be formally launched until April, but all U3A members are welcome to visit at https://beacon.u3a.org.uk. Let us know what you think at news@beacon.u3a.org.uk.

Beacon Upgrade

The Beacon Upgrade Working Group, the top-level Third Age Trust committee responsible for Beacon Upgrade, has begun its task of ensuring that the Upgrade is delivered to U3As. In a message to U3As last month Sam Mauger, Chief Executive of the Third Age Trust, confirmed that the Trust intends that the upgrade will be in service from April next year.

The Working Group has used information provided by U3As from the survey that was sent out at the beginning of the year to identify several areas of U3A management that may be demanding. The group has now sent a second survey to gain more detail about what U3As need from the upgrade.

The group will report their progress regularly to U3As. If you'd like to contact them with your thoughts then you can do so by emailing Sam at sam.mauger@u3a.org.uk.

A Beacon user says …

"As a 'non-technical' person, I have found the system simple and straight-forward to use."

Kath Hird, Bishop's Stortford U3A

New Training Guides

The Beacon team is preparing new training materials for Beacon users.

First, there will be a series of 'how to' guides. Each will be short and will take you, step by step, through a common Beacon task. The first set of these, on using the membership list, are almost complete and will soon appear on the new website.

We hope to complement these guides with short videos, showing you exactly what to do to achieve common Beacon tasks.

Has your U3A prepared any training materials? We'd welcome any contributions to our knowledge base. Send them to news@beacon.u3a.org.uk.
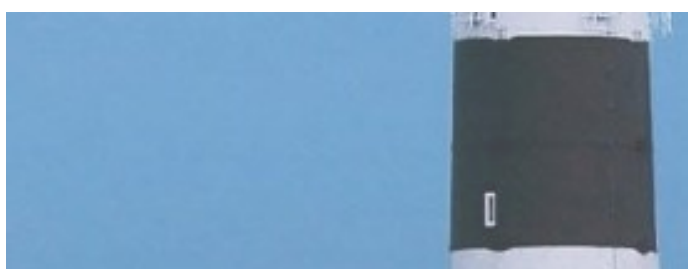
Specifying Beacon Upgrade

Beacon was designed and written by grass-roots U3As to meet their needs. Nearly 300 U3As now trust it with their administration. Only U3As know what they want from Beacon so U3As throughout the country are being invited to help shape the Beacon upgrade.

The first stages of this have already taken place, with the survey in December asking U3As general questions about how they run their organisation, and the recent survey adding detail to the information gathered. The next stage is to make use of the knowledge of members around the UK who have expertise in running their own U3A.

Most of the work will be done by a series of sub groups formed from volunteers from all over the country. The organisation of the sub groups has not been announced but there are likely to be functional teams (e.g. Membership, Finance) arranged into geographical regions.

Frank Bailey, Beacon Team Support Lead, is heading up the specification process and has written to those U3A members who have volunteered to help with the specification. He passed on a message of thanks from Sam Mauger and explained how the specification process will work. The starting point will be a description of the existing Beacon system, because we know that it gets the job done. This will be enhanced by considering the results of the surveys. The Sub groups will then consider the specification in the light of their U3A and Beacon experience, refine the requirements and set priorities.

The output of the sub groups will be collated and then returned to them for final review before being used to write the tender documents. Some time later the sub groups will evaluate the responses received from bidders.

It's not too late to volunteer. If you have knowledge or skills that could help the Beacon Upgrade project, either by serving on a specification sub group of in any other way, then please get in touch with Frank at frank.bailey@beacon.u3a.org.uk.

Demo Site Improvements

The Beacon demonstration suite is a useful tool, letting U3As see for themselves how Beacon can help them. But the shared demo site has slightly restricted what tests a U3A can perform when evaluating the system, as all data on the site is shared.

Individualised demonstration systems are now available to U3As evaluating Beacon. The data visible to them is for their use alone, to evaluate the functionality safe in the knowledge that their testing cannot affect another U3A, and other U3As can't inconvenience them.

To request a demo site contact info@beacon.u3a.org.uk
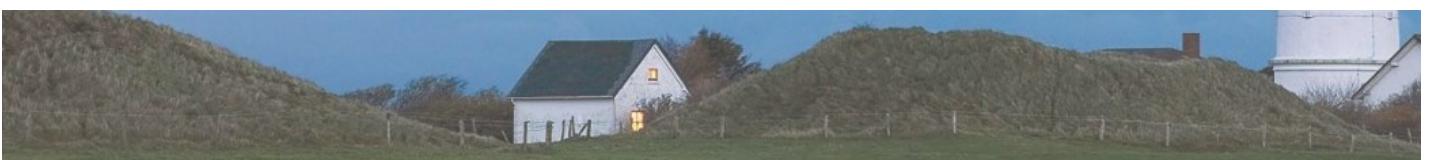
What's New in Beacon?

Beacon isn't standing still, and there are many improvements in the pipeline for Beacon users.

The development team has implemented a new way of testing changes to the Beacon software. This will be rolled out in the coming weeks and will shorten the time to introduce changes, as well as make them more reliable.

A new method of logging in to Beacon's Members' Portal is on its way. U3As requested an easier way for their members to log in to Beacon. They will soon be able to log in using an email and password instead of having to provide five pieces of information.

U3A treasurers haven't been forgotten. Several improvements to the financial module are in the pipeline.

Finally, the team are investigating problems reported by users on the forum, and making changes as required.

Beacon People

"I got involved very early on, the U3A was looking at the Steyning database and then Beacon became available.

I can't remember why, but I became South East Region co-ordinator. I had no knowledge of actually using Beacon (and still don't) so acted as a link between U3As and Supporters, which I found very enjoyable. I was then persuaded to learn how to check data prior to migration. Again something I found rewarding to do, particularly the data that was migrated without a single error !! (Only once).

Currently I am involved in being a Beacon Supporter, giving presentations and a recent challenge to facilitate a Beacon workshop which was hard work but interesting for me and useful to the delegates.

One reason I think this was valuable is a) accurate information is passed on, and b) people do like face to face contact.

I also manage a network, and find that the overlap between doing that and Beacon is very large. I don't think any network meeting has not had some mention of Beacon !!"

Sally Ingledow, Stubbington U3A,
Beacon Supporter

Have Your Say

We hope you find Beacon News interesting, and we'd like to hear your comments. What would you like to see in Beacon News? Do you have any Beacon tips that might help other users? Can you help the documentation team by sending in your Beacon how-to and training guides?