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

Message from Beacon National Support Lead

What is happening in Beacon

The Trust has approved additional resource from Siftware to correct software issues and develop enhancements. Initial focus is on significant software issues.

Over the last month we have focused on restoring and improving full email functionality. Previous work has resolved several issues such as the mail delivery log updating correctly and the notification to senders and Site Administrators of bounced addresses. We will continue to work on improving the email delivery system over the coming months.

We have set up a group of experienced developers within the Beacon team to analyse requests for corrections and improvements to the current Beacon system. This will include historical, current and future requests. The team will work with Siftware to ensure improvements are realised in a timely manner and checked and tested before implementation.

Bug fixes and enhancements are now moving through the pipeline. Twenty four software improvements are currently being worked on, six of which will be released next month. One of the six is the introduction of a banner to request permission from a user to use cookies – Beacon uses cookies to enable users to keep their log in details and to store user preferences. All cookies used in Beacon are there to support user experience.

Message from Beacon National Support Lead (continued)

However, we have been advised that as the cookies are not strictly essential under the "Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations" we are required to ask permission before deploying them. It has also been brought to our attention that the use of pixel tracking the opening of emails also runs foul of this law and we have made the decision to switch this off.

Although Beacon 2 is not going ahead we are working hard to develop Beacon to include the enhancements promised. The Beacon development board is currently looking at the way forward.

We have developed a method of using Beacon for Networks and after a short trial with two pilot networks this will be made available to networks in general. For more information on Beacon for Networks see article on page 3.

Frank Bailey

FURTHER INFORMATION

Knowledge Base merged with User Guide

The main benefit is to provide a one-stop site for all documented guidance to Beacon users.

A review by the Beacon Documentations Team had revealed that:

- A few Knowledge Base articles were simply duplicating information already in the User Guide
- Many Knowledge Base articles had a significant degree of overlap with User Guide articles
- A number of Knowledge Base articles provided guidance to specific, less common issues (these have been added as a sub-article to the appropriate User Guide article)

The most efficient way to use the User Guide is to enter a keyword or phrase (in quotation marks) in the search box. This will generate a list of hyperlinked articles containing the keyword or phrase.

Beacon for Networks and Regions

The Trust has agreed that Affiliated Networks and Regions can use the recently reconfigured Beacon system to manage and communicate with u3as without incurring a charge.

"Networks are informal groupings of u3as usually local to each other. Representatives from each u3a meet to share ideas, events, speakers, training sessions, discuss issues and support each other."

Two pilot sites have been set up to gain practical experience of how this will work. Once sufficient information has been gathered it is planned to add any new articles to the User Guide and then to roll it out nationally.

The functionality this should provide is as follows:

- A simple database of contact details for the Network members available through the cloud, with the security already within Beacon
- A quick way to communicate with their members by email
- The means to record the officers of each u3a
- A way to record people signing up to attend an event organised by the Network and record payment received
- Simple cashbook accounting for any monetary transactions
- The same Support provided through the Help Desk

Each Network will need to provide u3a contact details to the Beacon Team which will not be shared with the Trust. Each Network site can be set up by importing data as currently undertaken for regular u3as using Beacon.

Any Network interested in using Beacon for the above mentioned purposes should contact John Alexander by email: john.alexander@beacon.u3a.org.uk in the first instance.

Beacon Email Enhancements

The use of Beacon email to contact members has increased significantly over the past 16 months and Beacon now dispatches over 1.5 million emails per month. This increase led to performance issues that gave problems with the email delivery logs, some duplicate sends and those Cloudflare timeouts.

In April a new server dedicated to emails was configured which now runs the delivery logs. The latest under-the-covers enhancement deployed in June addresses timeouts by placing email dispatches on a queue for processing. This means the sender doesn't wait until the emails are dispatched, thus risking a timeout.

Also, in order to protect member's data privacy, Beacon no longer attempts to track and hence log whether a recipient has opened an email.

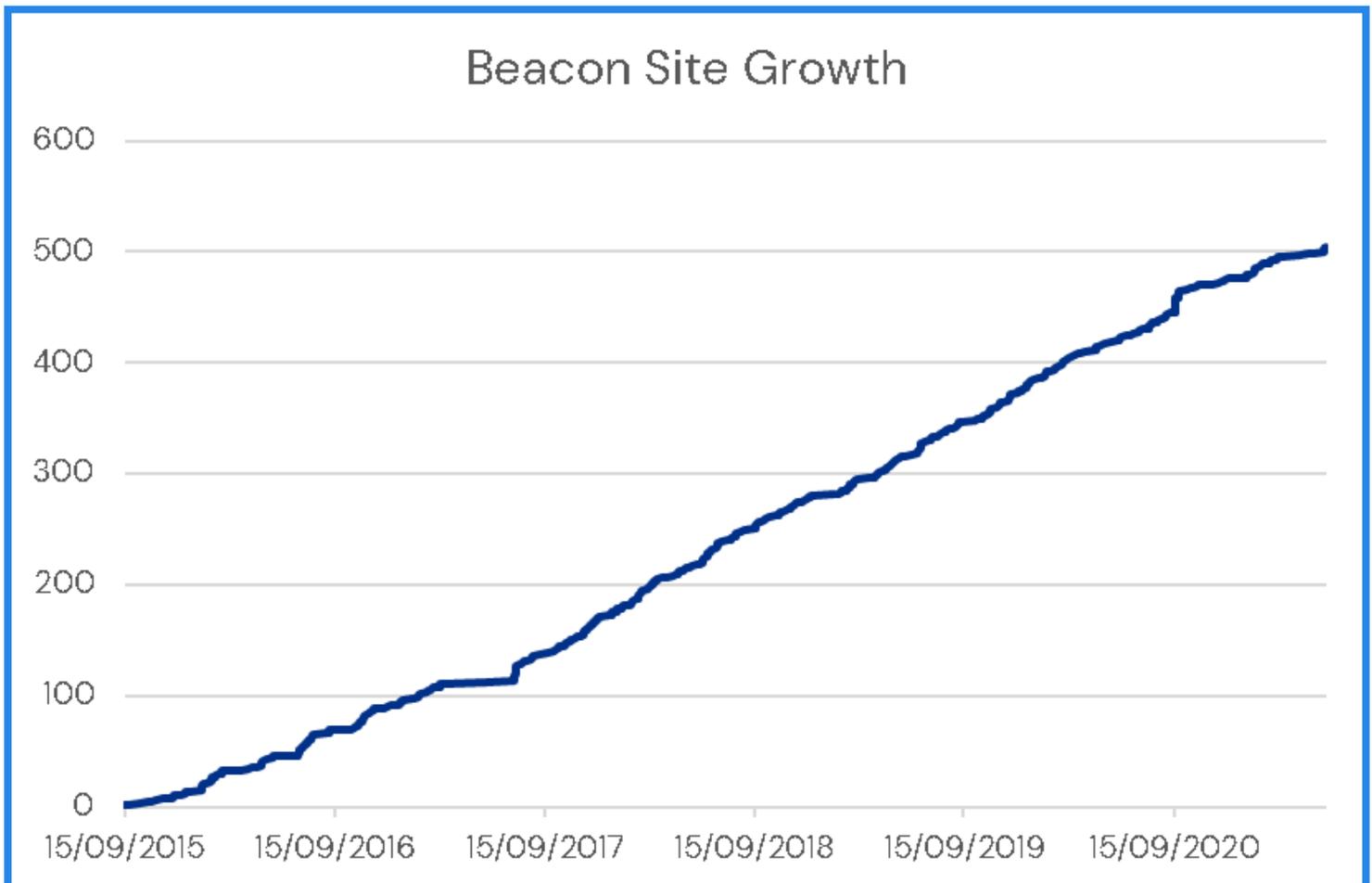
Next Phase

The use of the queue mechanism will be extended to Beacon downloads and exports as the larger u3as are suffering timeouts at busy times.

The Beacon Team have been specifying further enhancements to be deployed over the coming weeks. These include fixing the map view of postcodes for members and venues, keeping it legal by being clear on cookie use, fixing Group Ledger amounts losing a digit on input, negative ledger values download incorrectly to Excel and making it harder to accidentally renew multiple members by having an extra "are you sure step".

Beacon continues to grow

In September 2021, Beacon will celebrate 6 years since the first u3a went live on the system. The graph below plots the growth of u3as using Beacon which stands at 485 today, this is around half of all u3as in the UK.



Beacon Migrations

There are 485 u3as live on Beacon and a total of over 210,000 current members. 29 u3as have been migrated so far in 2021. A welcome to the following 7 u3as who migrated in June.

u3a	Supporter	Migrator
Paisley and District	Graham Golding	Graham Tigg
East Berwickshire	John Alexander	Graham Tigg
Melton Mowbray	Stephen Shipley	Stephen Shipley
Northallerton	Frank Bailey	Stephen Shipley
Hartley Wintney	Stephen Shipley	Stephen Shipley
Cranleigh and District	John Hopkins	
Tenbury Wells	Stephen Shipley	Stephen Shipley

COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

Who we are and what we do

Name	Role
Neil Stevenson	Team Leader
Tony Darbyshire	Webmaster
David Barrett	Assistant Webmaster
Alan Swindale	Forum Moderator
Dave Walsh	
Malcolm Tulip	Newsletter Editor

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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