



**NORTHERN IRELAND REGION
OF u3as**

Registered with The Charity Commission for
Northern Ireland NIC100691
(<http://u3ani.info>)

U3A TECHNOLOGY FORUM – MEETING 4TH NOVEMBER 2022

SUMMARY

Background

At the Autumn 2015 inter-U3A meeting the suggestion was made (Peter Croft, ND&A) that it would be valuable to have a Technology Forum within which the U3A members who are responsible for technological issues (websites, member lists, sound systems, etc). After a gap of a few years the meetings were resumed in the Europa Hotel on 4th November 2022.

Attendance

Brendan Mullan, NIREC	Joan Hamilton, Lisburn
Sheila Magee, Downe	Hill Wilson, Comber
Brendan Mulhall ,Downe	Edwin Campbell, Ballymena
Michael Diver, Ballymoney	Bernie Fox, Ballymena
Pauline Prior ,Belfast	Eric Henry, Ballymena
Allen Young, Holywood	Deirdre Kenny, NIREC
Joan Hamilton, Lisburn	Libby Henry, NIREC
Pauline Prior ,Belfast	Valerie Cobain, NI Trustee
Allen Young, Holywood	Mairead Mc Gouran, NIREC

Aims of the Forum

The aims of the Forum are just to share ideas and learn from each other.

Conclusions of the Forum

The meeting was very useful for most if not all those attending. Those who are tech-savvy were able to present new ideas, mainly relatively simple, and thus encourage others to follow up and discuss with their committees. The forum gave an opportunity for Valerie, the NI Trustee, and Brendan, a member of the Lets Talk Tech group ([website](#) & [Facebook](#)), to update attendees on progress with website and Beacon and to feed back the views of NI members.

Discussion Points

Although primarily a technology group, the discussion ranged across related u3a management topics.

Beacon

- Opinions on Beacon were mixed, some reporting blips which did not allow the correct transfer of info from one part to another. Some find it “clunky”, in particular by not allowing sufficient graphics.
- Beacon 2 appears to have stalled and there is no news of it being resurrected.

- The general opinion was that Beacon (£1 per member) is too expensive compared with alternative systems. Brendan from Causeway is exploring use of the much cheaper LoveAdmin app and will keep us updated.

Methods of paying fees

- **Cash** – During covid Belfast u3a moved away from cash payment of fees. Some u3as say that dealing with cash is a nuisance, others that it is simple
- **Cheques** – Several u3as agreed that there can be problems with cheques, not signed or addressed properly or wrongly dated but they are mostly happy to accept them, though recognising that cheques are on the way out and that people can have difficulty finding their cheque books.
- **Standing Orders** – Causeway continue to receive some membership fees via SO. These were setup years ago by members. The amount is now incorrect (£6 instead of currently £10) and have been unable to trace these members.
- **Direct Debit** – Belfast have set up a system to accept membership payment by Direct Debit, saying that it was time consuming to set up but very simple for members and efficient for the Treasurer. It involves authorisation of two signatories through the Bank, and by the BACS Payment Services Ltd (<https://www.bacs.co.uk/>). This is completed through your Bank. Cheques and bank transfers are also acceptable.
- **Discounted payments** – To encourage the use of Direct Debits Belfast currently offers a discount to those paying by that means.
- **Card Readers** – Causeway uses a Sumup card reader for group payments but not for membership fees, as the agreement with the company bars this. Alan from Holywood recommended a different make, **Square**, which does accept membership fees.
- **QR Codes** – These seem to be a likely future development but not used yet by NI u3as.

Texting

- Brendan Mulhall of Downe use a system whereby a phone is dedicated to use for u3a purposes, with contacts being synched from the membership list on Beacon. Recognising that not everyone checks emails, they follow these up with a text message to say that you have been sent an email about whatever. Brendan explained how texting also reaches and is appreciated by what he calls “house members”, those who cannot get out to attend u3a events.
- He uses the Qbix Group app to synch the names, allowing him to email all members at once at no cost but expressed doubt that this facility is still free. He suggested that such a system could be provided for u3as.
- There was discussion on an alternative of using Groups within gmail (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gopvSuuW558>) but the difference seems to be that Brendan can link names from Beacon membership list whereas the alternative needs all members’ emails to be directly entered and updated.

Websites

- Brendan from Causeway explained that National Office is in the process of drawing up a proforma Wordpress website layout for use by u3as, each of which can then tailor it to their own requirement.
- U3as using it will need to arrange a domain name and host.
- Michael from Ballymoney explained that they are using Weebly but they plan to move to Wordpress and asked for clarity on when the NO version might be available.
- He was told that news about this should be available fairly soon but there is uncertainty about the process involved in moving from Sitebuilder to Wordpress. Valerie will seek clarification.

Voice Enhancer

- Brendan from Downe explained how a simple voice enhancer costing only around £20 can be used on walk/talks to ensure that any presentation can be heard at the back of a group.

Hybrid Meetings

- Brendan from Causeway demonstrated the power of a Meta Portal TV which has an integrated 'clever' camera including an array of 8 microphones and costing only £50, can be used for hybrid meetings. The Meta Portal TV needs to be linked via HDMI to a TV screen at the site, and is capable of running Zoom. Brendan runs many hybrid meetings for activity groups of up to 20 attending in-person and commonly 4 or 5 online. Both the Zoom attendees and in-person attendees can see and hear each other clearly. With the permission of the presenters, the meeting can be recorded and made available via a YouTube link. Reasonably good wifi is needed but the camera has a wide angle. See <https://www.amazon.com/Facebook-Portal-Smart-Video-Calling/dp/B07XPLJ9TZ>)
- He told how Causeway might have 150 members at their monthly meeting (using a PTZ camera), up to 40 attending on Zoom (who can have their questions relayed to the speaker) and up to 350 viewing the recorded meeting later on YouTube.
- For a medium sized meeting where amplified sound is needed Brendan recommended the use of a QTX PA12+ portable sound system which has integrated speaker, amplifier and 2 wireless microphones. This can be connected to a Zoom hosting laptop allowing the online audience to hear and be heard. Brendan advised that this sound system can be hired at £25 per day from [Baird Sound Systems](#), Belfast who also sell it at a competitive price (around £250). This will allow you to test it before committing to a purchase.

Document Sharing

- When office bearers are changed there is always an issue of transferring documents.
- Brendan from Causeway argued that doing so via a memory stick is inherently unsafe and made a plea for u3as to save all documents in the cloud in shared cloud folders.
- Microsoft 365 provides storage in One Drive but there are other cloud storage systems.
- Brendan (Causeway) advised that Microsoft will grant 10 free licences for Microsoft 365 Business Premium to registered charities. He suggested that these licences could be used by the principal officers of each u3a's committee. Causeway has taken up this offer. By using the facilities offered by this software, principally email and cloud storage, there would be continuity between retiring and newly appointed committee officers.
- Michael from Ballymoney suggested that he and Brendan should determine the setup and configuration of Microsoft 365 Business Premium suitable for u3as. Brendan agreed.
- He advocated that digital documents be saved in a cloud folder and that paper ones be scanned and similarly saved.
- See <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/save-documents-online-8ba1f596-6bc9-4e35-99d4-e27a40037789#:~:text=Saving%20your%20files%20to%20the,OneDrive%2C%20sign%20in%20to%20Office.&text=With%20a%20document%20open%20in,now%20by%20clicking%20Sign%20In>.
- The link to the cloud storage can then be shared between committee members.

FaceBook

- There was general recognition that u3as should use some form of social media but that for a u3a to have its own Facebook page seems a bad idea.

- Sheila from Downe explained how they had successfully publicised a membership recruitment drive by identifying local community groups and asking them to post invitations on their facebook pages
- Pauline from Belfast explained how their website includes links to national u3a social media sites ([Belfast U3A: Social Media \(u3asites.org.uk\)](http://Belfast U3A: Social Media (u3asites.org.uk))) and suggested that other u3as can submit up to four photos and 2 or 3 lines of text to eleanor.mair@u3a.org.uk for inclusion in any digital communication.

Footnote:

If you would like more detail on any of the issues raised please contact the u3a referred to in the topic point.