

**MINUTES of the Annual General Meeting**  
**Held virtually**  
**at 11:00 on Thursday 24 September 2020**

## **1. Welcome and Apologies**

The President, Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow FRSB, welcomed everyone to the Society's eleventh AGM, and the first held virtually.

Apologies were received from;

Dr John O'Connor, Professor Geoff Dixon, Professor Sir Munir Pirmohamed, Professor Sheila Heymans, Professor Donovan Kelly, Dr Peter Wilberforce, Dr Elizabeth Evesham, Mr George Mackay, Dr Richard Lerner, Professor Alan Malcolm, Professor John E Cooper, Professor Peng Khaw, Professor Hilary McQueen, Professor Jo Arendt, and others.

The President asked for any amendments to the minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting held on 15 May 2019. There were none.

**The Minutes of the previous AGM were ACCEPTED as a true record.**

This year's Annual General Meeting was postponed from May 2020 due to the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) and steps were undertaken to organise a virtual event in its place. The President thanked the staff of the Society for their hard work during the past six months as they adapted to working from home and continued the smooth running of Society operations.

The past six months have seen all meetings and events move to online formats, which has had the upside of almost doubling participation at some Society events as audiences across the UK and globally were engaged.

The President also noted that a new COVID-19 bulletin was launched by the science policy team and has been very well received by members.

## **2. CEO Report**

Dr Mark Downs FRSB (MD) gave an update on the last financial year October 2018 to September 2019, plus highlights of a few events since then.

The year was the first of the three-year strategic plan, Biology Changing the World, focusing on activity to inspire the public, influence politics and media, support bioscientists and the sector, and evolve as an organisation. Underpinning this has been a 'biology for all' approach, looking to be more inclusive and do more on the equality and diversity agenda.

During the year, the Society sold its share of CDH Ltd, the company that owned office buildings alongside partner organisations. As a result of the sale, the Society relocated to new offices at 1 Naoriji Street, London, a renovated 19<sup>th</sup> century school, with meeting room facilities that will be available for hire by members and member organisations.

Membership remained a key activity and, after reaching a peak of over 18,000 members numbers, dropped slightly to 17,744 at July 2019. The drop in numbers is partly a result of pre-paid and student memberships that lapsed and weren't renewed. Across all grades, 42% of members are female and the Society is actively working to bring this number up to 50%. MD encouraged members to put forward their colleagues for membership, especially at Fellowship grade where women make up a smaller percentage. Overall membership retention is 83% and remains steady at 90% for MRSB and FRSB grades.

MD thanked the strategic partners who provide support to the Society both financially and in terms of collaboration and engagement. These are the Biochemical Society, British Ecological Society, British Pharmacological Society, British Society for Immunology, The Genetics Society, The Nutrition Society, The Physiological Society, Society for Applied Microbiology and Society for Experimental Biology. MD also thanked the three key supporting organisations which provide further additional financial support, AstraZeneca, BBSRC and the Wellcome Trust.

Alongside the strategic partners and key supporters, the Society has over 90 member organisations spanning the biosciences. The wider membership inputs knowledge and expertise, allowing the Society to advocate on behalf of the sector.

MD thanked the work of the branches, who have continued their efforts during lockdown, and called on members to volunteer on their local branch committee and participate at events. The Society has 17 UK and two international branches which host events and engage the public and the bioscience community, as well as coming together at least once a year to share information and help inform Society strategy.

Accreditation of bioscience degrees continues to be a key area of activity and is a way that the Society can influence and impact the education sector. The goal of accrediting at least 50% of institutions that offer bioscience degrees was reached during the financial year and the Society is expanding to include international institutions. The Society has also started a joint Doctoral Training Initiative alongside the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Institute of Physics.

The Society continues to support professional progress, offering professional registers under licence from the Science Council as well as the Chartered Biologist status. A new Industry Skills Certificate has been introduced which offers training for individuals wishing to transfer into the industry sector. Online training courses continue to grow, especially during the past year as work has continued remotely and virtually.

Biology Week during the past financial year occurred in October 2018 and saw huge participation in events and competitions, including over 6 million engagements across social media platforms. A new documentary, *Addressing Global Challenges*, was produced in collaboration with ITN productions, and subsequent programmes were created in 2019 and 2020.

MD expressed sincere condolences on behalf of the Society to Dr David Ware's family and friends, who passed away in December 2019. Dr Ware received the President's Medal in 2019 and was a key figure at the Kent, Surrey and Sussex branch.

The range of publications offered by the Society continues to grow. Alongside the award-winning *The Biologist* magazine, there is the *Journal of Biological Education*, *Oxford Biology Primers* (collaboration with Oxford University Press) and *Emerging Topics in Life Sciences* (collaboration with the Biochemical Society and Portland Press). To celebrate the 10 year anniversary of the RSB, a one-off publication was produced for the *Emerging Topics in Life Sciences* with guest editor

Professor Richard Reece FRSB, the Society's Honorary Secretary. This edition is available to view online for free for a limited period.

The Society's advocacy role remains critically important. The education policy engagement work has been particularly crucial during the past six months as the teaching landscape has been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the financial year, the Society was involved with the GCSE timetabling report, Ofsted's inspection framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). As the curriculum has evolved to differ across the devolved nations the Society continues to engage and input into biology curriculums, as well as benchmarking biology education against other subjects.

The science policy agenda has seen the Society continue to actively engage with Parliament. Though special interest groups, the Society has been involved with plant science and animal science policies, producing the *Growing the Future* report and advocating for regulations as the UK moves to leave the European Union framework of operations.

The Society provides a range of services for member organisations, including running conferences, events and administration services. MD encouraged member organisations which may be looking for such support to get in touch with the membership team, which already provides support to ten organisations and is continuing to expand.

October 2019 to September 2020 was a milestone year as the Society marked its 10th anniversary and 40 years of having been granted a Royal Charter. Much of the activity took place before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March when all events were suspended. One of the areas of activity was Pioneers in Biology, celebrating the people that have done tremendous things for biology at either the regional or local level. As part of this, a blue plaque was installed in Northern Ireland for Frank Pantridge who developed the portable defibrillator. It is hoped that further blue plaques will be installed in 2021. MD thanked the many member organisations that sponsored the anniversary year activities, without which the celebrations would not have been possible.

In March 2020 the Society held an Anniversary Gala Dinner at the Science Museum. At the event, Sir David Attenborough received his Lifetime Achievement Award and spoke passionately of the Society and the importance of biology for the future.

The six-month period from March to September 2020 saw a new way of working remotely. The science policy team worked quickly to produce an informative and timely COVID-19 bulletin delivered fortnightly, and online education resources were made available by the Society as well as many partner organisations. A new policy resource library has also been launched that contains over 800 consultation responses both from the RSB and its member organisations.

MD thanked members of Council, RSB committees, special interest groups and branches for volunteering their time and expertise to the Society. He particularly thanked Society staff for their work during the challenging past six months of the COVID-19 pandemic and their adaptability to a new way of working remotely.

### **3. Question and answer session**

A question and answer session was held with the President, Honorary Officers and the Chief Executive (MD).

Q1. What will activity look like in 2021 and will online activity continue even when physical activity resumes?

MD noted that remote working and online events have opened up new opportunities for the Society and have been valuable for engaging with wider audiences. All Society events are planned to be held online until at least the end of March 2021 and perhaps even later, and the Society will explore a hybrid model of in-person and virtual attendance once physical meetings are possible.

Q2. BLM (Black Lives Matter) has been a key issue in 2020. Could you please let us know more about the diversity work of the RSB?

MD highlighted that equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) continues to be a critical area of work and the Society has a Diversity Champion on Council (Professor Caroline Austin FRSB) who coordinates this work. Over the past year a network of EDI ambassadors has been created, made up of over 20 representatives from all Society committees.

The President also noted that the Society is coordinating meetings with member organisations to share EDI best practices. The Society and its Council have been exploring innovative ways to broaden inclusion, such as creating a shadow Council of student and early career members. There has also been a focus on engaging the member organisations who are leading in various areas of EDI activity and can inform the work of the Society.

Q3. Has there been a decline in membership numbers during the pandemic?

MD reported that there has been no decline and in fact membership numbers have continued to grow each quarter in 2020. However, membership is being monitored closely to see if any delayed effects occur. A new system was introduced in 2019, run by Chord UK, contacting members whose membership lapsed and improving retention rates.

Q4. Do you foresee any issues for the RSB after Brexit?

MD commented that problems will be inevitable after leaving the EU on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021. It is still unclear whether the UK will continue to participate in Horizon 2020, the EU research funding programme, as well as being eligible for smaller regional grants for research and development. However, membership is not predicted to be affected. The Honorary Secretary highlighted that the Society exists to work on behalf of its membership and will continue to work very strongly to inform and influence the UK parliamentary agenda.

#### **4. Receive and consider the Annual Report and Accounts**

Dr Paul Brooker FRSB, Honorary Treasurer, gave an overview of the Society's annual accounts from 1 October 2018 to 31 September 2019. The year proved an unusually intense period of activity, including the sale of buildings Charles Darwin House 1 and 2 and the move to 1 Naoroji Street in Angel, London. More detail on the finances of the property sales and new rental accommodation can be found in the Trustees annual report.

During the financial year income was £2.6m and expenditure £3.1m, leaving an operational deficit (higher expenditure than income) of £497,000.

The full deficit, including accounting items, was £531,000. Included within this are several one-off items, including a non-cash loss of £102,000 on the properties. This 'loss' was due to the value placed on the properties at time of valuation, which fell, as did all London property valuations, largely due to Brexit. In fact, the Society made a substantial capital gain on its share of the two buildings since its purchase. Also included were £100,000 of relocation costs, an unusually large irrecoverable

VAT bill close to £100,000 (linked to the building sales) and £40,000 of legal costs. These four items account for £342,000 of the deficit.

Cash flow remained strong throughout the period, as it has done since the Society's inception, and the financial health of the RSB remains sound. Nonetheless, the Honorary Treasurer noted that the next two years are anticipated to be more challenging as adjustments are made to an increased operating cost base as a result of relocation and a slowdown in the expansion of membership. Membership subscriptions are the largest source of income and the Society remains grateful to all its members, both individual and organisational, for their continued support.

Moving from owning facilities to rented accommodation, the Society changed its asset base from property to cash. Cash is invested in a variety of platforms, including low-risk fixed-interest accounts and medium-risk mixed-asset base funds, from which the Society intends to make a modest income. The Society's partner in the latter is charity fund manager CCLA, which has many years of experience working with the charity sector. Importantly, the Society has not lost cash through the pandemic with the latest valuation of the fund showing a modest increase on the initial investment.

The Honorary Treasurer thanked the CEO, finance manager Surinder Sohal and all the executive team who have greatly aided the Treasurer's work. He also expressed gratitude to all members of the Finance Committee, Audit Committee, and auditors haysmacintyre, for all they have done to ensure that the Society's financial position continues to be sound and transparent.

Questions:

Q1. Is there any area of RSB activity that is a priority for investment in the next financial year?

The Society is in the middle of a plan to build a new website and online platform, with a projected investment of £100k for the project. The financial investments are managed by CCLA, although the Society is not investing in funds linked to the fossil fuel industry.

Q2. What plans does the RSB have to diversify income?

The Society has set a target to raise 10% of income from external fundraising sources. Recent years have seen a bigger focus on legacies, and the Honorary Treasurer noted his gratitude to all those who have left a gift in their Will to the Society, which help fund the continued running of activity such as grants, outreach events and supporting the professional membership. Further fundraising activity is being developed.

## 5. Voting on Resolutions

The President put forward two resolutions to the meeting.

Resolution: This meeting approves the Annual Report and Accounts of the Society for the year October 2018 - September 2019.

Proposer: Henry Sibun

Secunder: Alan Matthews

Votes: In favour = 128 (54 online votes at the AGM and 74 proxy votes)

Against = 0

**It was RESOLVED that the annual report and accounts for 2018-2019 were accepted by the meeting as a true record.**

Resolution: This meeting authorises the RSB's Council to appoint haysmacintyre as the RSB's auditors for the financial year October 2019 - September 2020 and to set their remuneration.

Proposer: Rachel Lambert-Forsyth

Secunder: Henry Sibun

Votes: In favour = 129 (55 online votes at the AGM and 74 proxy votes)

Against = 0

**It was RESOLVED that Council will appoint haysmacintyre for the audit of the financial year 2019-2020 and to set their remuneration.**

## **6. Election of Council Members**

The Honorary Secretary, Professor Richard Reece FRSB, reminded members of the constitution of Council. Three of the members are Honorary Officers (President, Secretary and Treasurer), four members are appointed from the College of Individual Members, and four from the College of Organisation Members. A further four members are appointed by Council to fill any skill gaps.

This year there were two vacancies on Council. In the College of Individual Members, the first term for Professor Nigel Brown FRSB came to an end. Professor Brown, who acted as chair of the College of Individual Members, stood for election for a second term, and following a call to individual members a further five nominations were received. An election was held, and Professor Brown was elected for a second term of four years.

In the College of Organisational Members, the term of Professor Patrick Hussey FRSB came to an end. Three nominations were received for the vacancy, and following an election in the College, Professor Stefan Przyborski FRSB, representing the Anatomical Society, was elected.

The Honorary Secretary noted that the Society is working to make the RSB Council as diverse as possible to reflect the membership of the organisation, and that after the election result above, Council currently has eight female Trustees and six male Trustees. He also reported that the Society will be working on a campaign in the new year to encourage a diverse set of nominations from its membership and appealed to attendees to nominate themselves or their peers from a range of backgrounds and skills when future Council vacancies arise.

## **7. Confirmation of Honorary Officers**

The President reminded members that the Society's Honorary Officers are Council elected and must be reappointed on an annual basis for a maximum of five years. She confirmed that Professor Richard Reece has been reappointed as Honorary Secretary for his fourth term and Dr Paul Brooker as Honorary Treasurer for his third term. The President expressed her gratitude to both of the Honorary Officers for their enormous support to the President, Chief Executive and committees they work on.

## **8. AOB**

The President gave thanks to everyone attending today's first virtual Annual General Meeting of the RSB. There being no other business, the President brought the meeting to a close at 12:00.