

Council Meeting

**16 September 2020
12:30-14:30
By videoconference**

Web Minutes

1. Welcome and apologies

Present:	Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow (President)	JG
	Professor Richard Reece (Hon Secretary) (from 13:00)	RR
	Dr Paul Brooker (Hon Treasurer)	PB
	Professor Hilary MacQueen	HMcQ
	Professor Patricia Kuwabara (left the meeting at 13:30)	PK
	Professor Nigel Brown	NB
	Professor Claire Wathes	CW
	Professor Caroline Austin	CA
	Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore	SJB
	Professor Stefan Przyborski	SP
	Professor Yvonne Barnett	YB
	Dr Louise Leong	LL
	Mr Terry Gould	TG
Observers:	Dr Mark Downs, Chief Executive	MD
	Dr Laura Bellingan, Director of Policy & Public Affairs	LB
	Mr Mark Leach, Associate Director (Membership, Regions & Facilities)	ML
	Mr Paul Trimmer, Associate Director (Accreditation & Professional Affairs)	PT
	Ms Jen Crosk, PA to Chief Executive (Minutes)	JC
	Ms Karen Patel, Events & Regional Manager (for Paper 4)	KP
	Dr Laura Marshall, Senior Science Policy Officer (for Paper 5)	LM
	Dr Jade Hall, Science Policy Officer (for Paper 5)	JH
Apologies:	Professor Paul Hoskisson	PH
	Dr Jacqui Piner	JP

1.1 Overall declaration of interests

None reported.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 June 2020

2.1 Review of action points

All actions had been completed or appeared within the Agenda.

2.2 Matters arising not on the Agenda

None reported.

2.3 Approval of Minutes and Web Minutes

Council **APPROVED** the Minutes and Web Minutes.

2.4 Conflicts of interest for items on this agenda

None reported.

Section A: Governance and Risk Management

3. Chief Executive's Report including new working arrangements

Mark Downs (MD) reported that the Society's partnership role with RSC and IoP had become increasingly valuable during lockdown, with discussions covering staffing and science policy issues.

The office had just reopened but all staff had the option to continue working from home until at least the New Year. The Society's risk assessment had been shared with the landlord and a statement will go onto the website for good practice. Council felt reassured that Society staff were well supported by local public health advisors and the landlords to ensure the environment was as COVID safe as possible and asked MD to share the summary information with Council. The risk assessments completed by the Society and the landlord outlined the process for anyone testing positive for COVID.

For home working, staff were encouraged to complete a self-assessment of their workstation using the online DSE guidance and a new home working policy had been agreed by the SMT and Management Group. Staff welfare is a standing item on the SMT weekly agenda.

Action: MD to share a summary COVID office working information with Council

Following the recent staff survey on home working, Council felt that a strategy should be developed when considering post lockdown working arrangements.

As the Naoroji Street lease was signed in May 2019, the Society was locked in until at least summer 2025. It may be possible to explore buy-out options and the President felt it may be worth looking at this in more detail. Consideration could be given to Societies wanting to use office space and this would be kept under review. We are also able to assign the lease.

Action: MD to look at the break-point options in the lease

The online AGM is scheduled for 24 September, with Jacqui Piner giving the Charter Lecture and MD invited Council members to participate.

RR joined the meeting.

4. Health & Safety

No injuries at home had been reported and many of the Health & Safety issues around COVID were covered under the CEO's item. SP asked for clarity around the types of home injury that should be recorded and MD suggested this should be focussed on the immediate work area and RSB-supplied equipment.

5. Professional Matters Committee update

RR reported there had been five separate cases in the past six months and thanked the Council members who had acted on the Committee.

The cases had been a mixture of those involving accusations directed at staff or inappropriate language to staff (from external sources) and issues raised by other members. All had been investigated thoroughly, and with care, in order to protect the Society and members. As a consequence of COVID, there had been some inappropriate posts made on social media, using the individual's membership status for credibility and the Society will need to continually scan social media for inappropriate posts as far as resource permits. Appropriate conclusions had been achieved, in some cases leading to expulsion from membership. One case had unsuccessfully gone to appeal. RR reassured Council that the Society has a robust and fair process in place to deal with complaints and would be happy to provide more detailed reports on the complaints if required.

6. Proposal for a Nominations Committee

AI reported that historically, a Committee has been brought together as and when required, to identify members for Council-nominated places and asked if this should be made a permanent standing committee, meeting at least once a year.

Council **AGREED** with this suggestion in principle but would like to ensure the Committee also had some direct responsibility for diversity. It was **AGREED** that diversity requirements should be added under the ToR. JG asked if the remit should also be extended to include support for other Council places, especially in identifying skills or diversity requirements. MD noted that the ToR had been broadened so that the Committee could cover Education & Science Policy, Finance Committee and key standing committees where nominations were required.

TG added that the final (diversity) paragraph in the ToR could be perceived as an option, so needs to be strengthened to make it a firm commitment.

Council **AGREED** to the proposal for a standing committee, along with further work on the ToR.

Action: MD to consider Council's comments and take forward in consultation with Honorary Officers.

AI added that it can be difficult for early career members to be nominated as they did not have the contacts, leading to very similar types of nominations being put forward. The Nominations Committee currently consists of three white males and one white female, with one vacancy. JG felt it was important to strengthen the Committee, aiming for greater diversity within its own membership, aided by an increase to six members. As some Council members will be reaching the end of their term, next steps (for review in December) will need to cover recruitment ahead of the January call for nominations. RSB staff are allowed to be in attendance but cannot be members of the Committee.

Section B: Strategy and Finance

7. RSB SWOT analysis and potential priority areas

A SWOT analysis had been completed in-house by staff and PT invited comment.

CA queried the weakness of the term biology and MD added that much of our membership associated themselves with their specialty, or sub-discipline, rather than as a biologist - bioscientist may therefore be a more appropriate term. PK felt it should remain in line with the mission of the RSB and perhaps biology remained the best option.

Council discussed the proposed 'opportunity' of increasing the amount of small grants and agreed this created a large amount of work for a small cost benefit and advised caution.

NB added that potential opportunities needed to be carefully sifted to see which items should be member benefits and which are more general in nature e.g. policy. HMcQ reminded Council that some of these opportunities, such as accrediting employer training, may involve a great deal of work and need to be carefully costed.

8. Biology Week

KP introduced this item. Biology Week is set to start on 3 October and PS will lead on media and communications. Activity will be decreased this year due to COVID, although a greater geographical spread was anticipated, along with increased social media engagement.

Science Minister, Amanda Solloway had now been confirmed for the Tuesday event entitled 'Engaging Parliament on Global Challenges' and Stephen Benn (SB) is approaching the S&T Select Committee for panel members. There will be competition winners/acceptance speeches on social media during the week, especially on Wednesday whilst Friday will be the "I'm a biologist" social media campaign. Alongside this, there will be promotion of video content from past events on YouTube, including an RI AI debate, the 2015 conversation with David Attenborough, the ITN feature and a range of other events.

Due to the national spread of events, there will be some overlap in branch event timings. JG asked if there will be analysis of the interest and take-up of the online content and KP confirmed data gathering would be an important activity to inform future work.

9. Diversity, Equality and Inclusion – next steps

LM and JH joined the meeting. Council received a paper prepared by CA, LM and JH, with feed in from JG. LM outlined the main themes.

Council noted the good progress and LM reported the next meeting on 2 October will cover diversity monitoring and consideration of next steps to increase diversity on committees and across all RSB activity. At organisational member level, arrangements were in place to connect organisations and share best practice. This had been in place for four years and continued to operate well but there were many new activities proposed, underpinned by a plan to consider such initiatives in detail and which the Society may wish to financially support or become a member of. The December paper will maintain the usual detail but will also link to the 'biosciences for all' theme in the Strategic Plan.

All the recommendations in the paper were **AGREED**. On a final point on how some organisations and government departments have built a 'shadow council' or similar structures, CA sought comment on taking this forward for the Society. The aim will be increasing engagement with early career members and ensuring greater diversity of input to Council considerations. Council were positive and JG was keen to see something develop.

Council congratulated the team and **AGREED** to receive the full report and detail on specific proposals, such as the shadow Council, in a paper at the December meeting.

10. Financial Planning

10.1 Finance Committee Meeting of 11 September

PB gave an update on Finance Committee (FC) discussions following a fully attended and engaged meeting on 11 September. The Committee had received reports on the Q3 forecast showing a significant improvement over budget and the budgets for FY20/21 and beyond. On the basis that the Society continued to operate normally from Q2 onwards, MD had proposed that a £159k deficit for the next financial year was likely. They were unanimous that this needed to improve and proposed action should be taken to reduce the deficit to close to break-even or surplus in 2021-22. They considered two scenario planning papers and PB commended the SMT and Tom Ireland for putting together clear, focussed and balanced papers. PB also gave thanks for the prompt turnaround of the draft minutes and paper summarising FC recommendations on cost reduction actions.

10.2 Q3 management accounts and year-end forecast

PB reported that the CCLA reserves had recovered well and were now in surplus compared to the original investment value in October 2019. There had been good active fund management by CCLA, and FC were content with the fund performance and continued liquidity within the Society overall. The cash position remained strong and in line with forecast. Council **ACCEPTED** the Q3 paper.

10.3 2020-21 budget

This had been discussed at the FC meeting and it was **AGREED** that MD should propose a revised budget in light of FC comments and any points raised within Council. The detail is covered in the next item.

10.4 Scenario planning

MD provided a summary of the budget planning process reiterating the likely £159k deficit in 20/21, with £58k deficit for the following year. FC had looked at the flexed options put forward, assuming normal operation to continue from January 2021 and little inflation on other expenditure. Modest membership and accreditation growth was included. The confirmed legacy payment of around £50k next FY (with £20k this FY) and a grant to UKBC had not been included in the budget as these were additional items outside normal operations.

Generic options – a range of possibilities to reduce the deficit were considered with FC recommending measures to enable the 20/21 budget to approach, as closely as possible, a break-even position. Each area was considered:

- On Parliamentary engagement, FC proposed no change. Council **AGREED**.
- Science policy was recognised as an important area of work and although there was FC agreement not to change anything, they felt it could be triaged carefully with other organisations to allow more focus. Council **AGREED**.
- Public Engagement - there was a potential opportunity to reduce expenditure on Public Engagement over the next two years. FC felt Biology Week should continue as a showcase activity, along with branch events but that the Society could step back from broader outreach work, certainly face to face, and make savings on venue/travel. This could be trialled for two years, at a potential saving of £25-£50k dependent upon detailed planning.

NB felt that it will be important for the Society to be represented, alongside chemistry and physics, at Science Week in March.

- Education Policy – FC agreed this should continue. There is some overlap with training therefore this activity may benefit from a review. PB added that, as RSB covered a large amount of work on 5-19 education, this provides an opportunity to highlight its value and funding requirements externally. Council **AGREED**.
- On the training side - there is potential to generate additional income by accrediting third party provision. Council **AGREED** the recommendation to review this service provision and immediate recruitment to the vacant Training Officer post, to now also cover support for elements of the RSB Registers work.
- Accreditation - PB felt the Accreditation Committee should again be asked to consider fees payable.
- Travel & Subsistence – assumptions had been made on returning to the office in the New Year but given the current situation, it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume current working practices will continue until summer 2021. CA felt it was good that staff are being given the opportunity to cover vacancies, which created a development opportunity. FC recommended budgeting on the basis of mainly virtual activity until June 2021 with staff able to work from home by choice, or necessity if official guidance required this. Council **AGREED**.

- *The Biologist* – FC discussed a wide range of options from a reduction in the number of physical editions to moving online only. Following a lengthy debate FC recommended continuing with at least four editions per annum, with increased online content, possibly as other digitally-only editions, particularly as this will help deliver the RSB's own environmental ambitions to reduce the carbon footprint. Linked to this, FC proposed moving towards asking members to opt in, as opposed to the current opt out, for print copy.

Council **AGREED** to move to an opt-in process, whilst ensuring clear communication with members on how to do this. On balance Council **AGREED** the recommendation of shifting to only four physical editions for those who opted-in.

Council also **AGREED to increased online content specifically for our membership.**

Council **AGREED** FC's recommendation that International members should not incur an additional charge for printed copies.

MD agreed to reflect these decisions in a new budget for 2020/21 and beyond.

ACTION: MD to prepare a new budget for agreement with FC and to circulate to Council.

Section C: Reports to Council

11. ESP meeting held on 3 September

SJB reported that the Committee had been well attended, with a full agenda. Recommendations for policy-lates topics would be listed in the minutes. The Committee had talked about the importance of the education policy work undertaken by the Society, and, in particular the excellent work by Lauren McLeod for schools and education policy - COVID, GCSEs and A levels. The Committee also discussed how to cover RSB activity under a Biology for All event. Consideration was being given to join the Reproducibility Network as an affiliate stakeholder member and SJB/LB will send further information to Council by email.

Action: SJB/LB to send information on the Reproducibility Network to Council in due course.

12. MPA Committee update & minutes of 7 August

Council were invited to comment on Honorary Fellowship options moving forward and a paper will be brought to Council during 2021.

13. Progress reports

13.1 Policy and Public Affairs Directorate

Council received the update paper and did not have any comments.

13.2 Membership, Regions and Events

Council received the update paper. CA highlighted the low percentage of female Fellows which did not represent staff in academia which the Society is continually striving to redress.

14. Any other Business

None reported.

The next Council meeting will be held on Wednesday 9 December 2020.



Signed electronically 16 September 2020