Royal Society of Biology

Council Meeting

Wednesday 16 September 2015
12:30-15:00

Charles 1 & 2, Charles Darwin House, 12 Roger Street, London WC1N 2JU

WEB Minutes

1. Welcome and apologies

The President welcomed Council and staff, thank the three Member Organisation (MO) observers for attending and gave apologies.

Present:
Professor Dame Jean Thomas (President)
Professor Chris Kirk (Hon Secretary)
Dr Pat Goodwin (Hon Treasurer)
Professor John Coggins
Dr Kim Hardie
Dr Liz Lakin
Professor Pete Downes
Dr Paul Brooker
Professor Richard Reece
Dr Aileen Allsop
Mr Tim Brigstocke
Professor David Blackbourn

Observers:
Dr Mark Downs, Chief Executive
Mr Jon Kudlick, Director of Membership, Marketing & Communication
Dr Laura Bellingan, Director of Science Policy
Ms Jen Crosk (Minutes)
Ms Jo Revill, British Society for Immunology
Mr Ian Russell, Society for Endocrinology
Mr Jon Misselbrook, Biochemical Society

Apologies:
Professor Julia Buckingham
Dr Jeremy Pritchard
Professor Chris Garland

1.1 Declaration of interests

No declarations were made.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 June 2015

2.1 Review of action points

All actions had been completed.

2.2 Matters arising not on the Agenda

Council agreed to discuss the current Council vacancy under Any Other Business.

2.3 Approval of Minutes and Web Minutes

Council **AGREED** the Minutes and Web Minutes.

2.4 Conflicts of interest

None reported.

3. Chief Executive's Report

Mark Downs (MD) summarised his paper, reporting that this was a time of significant change, with the welcomed Royal Title. The financial challenges meant that there were important issues to look at.

There had been significant staff changes. Two (soon to be three) members of the Science Policy team had left for positive reasons and recruitment had already started to fill two of these roles, the standard of applications had been significantly high. The Professional Registers & Training Manager had retired and the Acting Head would fulfil the role on a permanent basis following a competitive interview process.

The Director of Education & Training was now on maternity leave and the CEO highlighted that he will be covering the post and may have reduced capacity for some areas of work, especially external engagements. Council offered their support for attendance at events and also welcomed the opportunity to host regional Fellows lunches in the coming year. In Membership, Marketing & Communications (MMC), the Branches Coordinator would be leaving shortly and the Regional Coordinator in Scotland and the North East would take over some of the branches work. A new appointment would be announced shortly for the Gatsby-funded Professional Development Administrator, to work on the Technicians' Register. A new Membership Services role had been created, for which both the Genetics Society and the British Society for Neuroendocrinology had signed contracts. Two further contracts were expected.

MD reminded Council of staff changes in the Science Policy team and thanked the Biochemical Society for extending funding for the Policy Assistant post for a further six months.

Good media coverage had been received and 8,000 people had participated in the insect poll to date. The winner would be announced during Biology Week. There had also been good Policy media coverage around GM in Scotland. The Branches continued to be very active. The Regional Agenda would be discussed during the three-year plan item.

The Synthetic Biology Conference had been very well attended. This was inspired, and organised, by the Biochemical Society with whom we had partnered. There had been a good level of sponsorship from BBSRC and others. RSB underwrote the event.

The Gatsby grant would shortly be facilitating membership for FE students taking access to HE courses and some 400 new members were expected as a result. It was also anticipated that some 200 new affiliate level members would be joining due to the Defra funding for the new Plant Health Inspectors Register. The BBSRC had kindly agreed to partner the Society to help fund a new online training centre course around the use of animals in research (legislation and ethics module)

The CEO reported that Bayer Crop Science were keen to be an ongoing supporter of the new AS Level UKBC competition. Council confirmed that they did not see any conflict of interest at this level of support

Action: Jen Crosk to liaise with Council on regional Fellows' lunch dates for 2016.

Section A: Policy & Strategy

4. Report from ETP

Laura Bellingan (LB) reported that ETP had held useful discussions on the language and presentation of the three-year plan and fed back.

The Committee had looked at the Curriculum Committee plan, looking at an ideal curriculum, with contribution from the Talk Biology forum. Council felt that the word 'ideal' was not really appropriate but very much welcomed the work. The Talk Biology forum was now being used as one route to collect information and views on what an RSB-recommended curriculum might look like.

The proposed teacher excellence framework (TEF) continued to be an important policy area. Past RSB (and partner MO) reports on valuing teaching would obviously feed into this but there was an urgent need to develop thinking in order to be ready to respond. There had been talk from the Government of a green paper but nothing had so far emerged. The use of metrics (and which ones!) remained key although they were not the whole story. There was concern that the TEF might be used inappropriately around fee setting. However, there were substantially different views on this issues amongst universities. . Richard Reece (RR) argued there needed to be a substantial narrative to distinguish whichever metrics were agreed. TEF was highly relevant to Accreditation and needed close monitoring. Liz Lakin (LL) highlighted that the Degree Accreditation Committee had also discussed this at their last meeting and would follow developments, inputting as required.

Laura Bellingan (LB) noted that a meeting had been agreed between Jo Johnson, RSB, RSC, IoP and the RSE. Council asked that the Society's accreditation systems for bioscience should be promoted in the context of the TEF.

ETP noted the approach to postdoc training at UCL. LB asked Council how prevalent postdoc training was: there was a general sense that it was highly variable. RR recommended talking to BBSRC. LL mentioned that the Royal Society of Edinburgh had supported a range of different training programmes in Scotland. These were successful.

Aileen Allsop (AA) and others supported the concept of post-doc training course accreditation and pointed to plans for accrediting masters degrees as a possible next step for DAC. LB reported that she now sat on the BBSRC Post Doc working group.

ETP had considered how the Society might respond to calls to take a public view on continued membership of the European Union. MD had suggested that we should gather views from our membership, especially the MOs. We could then present this as "views from the bioscience community" and let this, plus factual evidence, speak for itself. Council welcomed this approach and Paul Brooker (PB) highlighted the need to ensure private sector impacts were also considered: ABPI could provide facts and figures for Pharma/ Biotech. Council encouraged ETP and RSB staff to start to collate and consider views in order to be well placed to make public comments. Council itself was fully supportive of continued membership of the EU.

Action: LB to develop the RSB's position on this through evidence gathering.

MD and LB noted that the Comprehensive Spending Review remained a critical area for current attention. RSB had responded to consultations and we had written to the Treasury about funding for Science; this could be a key issue for discussion with Jo Johnson at the planned forthcoming meeting. JR noted that timing was critical as much of the outcome could be decided far earlier than the public announcement deadline. Jo Revill proposed a new letter to BIS raising our concerns (over the next 2-3 weeks). The President noted that the RSB had already made these points in various letters and consultation responses over the last 2-3 months but there was little downside to writing directly to BIS.

Potential Research Council structural changes had been raised as an area of concern and would be closely monitored.

Action: LB to draft a letter to BIS

LB updated Council on the work of the National Capital Initiative (NCI) which ETP had recently reviewed. It had now been running for six years with its second large conference held at the British Library for around 250 people this financial year. ETP were content that the work continued to be valuable and Council were supportive of continuing this within the new three-year plan.

5. **Accreditation update**

LL reported that both Accreditation and Advanced Accreditation were progressing well. The Degree Accreditation Committee (DAC) had considered the next steps for international accreditation and although this was supported they were keen to ensure progress does not affect the performance (or capacity) of the domestic processes. Council agreed. There was agreement that a further paper on international accreditation would be valuable as it evolves.

6. Science Policy

6.1 Future of UKPSF

LB reported that the UKPSF Executive had met at the beginning of the month to discuss its future. The Gatsby grant had come to an end as well as SEB support. Follow-on funding from Gatsby was not expected. However, SEB had kindly offered interim funding on the condition that RSB presented options for new governance arrangements for the UKPSF at its November Council meeting. Council recorded their thanks to SEB for this generous offer.

LB asked for Council's views on the future of the UKPSF and specifically on the options presented in the paper. Council discussed the merits of both an independent UKPSF and the option of UKPSF moving fully into the RSB as an advisory committee. PD felt this model was the only one that was practical in the absence of full external funding. David Blackbourn (DB) and others were concerned about the potential workload and managing interim arrangements. Council also noted that if UKPSF became fully independent that the RSB would still need to interface with it and have an active plant science policy agenda possibly duplicating effort.

Decision: Council strongly favoured Option 1 – scaling UKPSF activities to fit available funding within the normal RSB budget process and establishing an RSB advisory committee or similar on Plant Sciences.

6.2 UKPSF Constitutional Amendment to Election Procedure

A paper was not tabled for this and Council agreed to process any urgent requests via email.

7. Membership Marketing & Communication

Jon Kudlick (JK) spoke on the subject of his paper and predicted membership numbers would reduce slightly in October, increasing again in January. RR noted that some approaches to his university by RSB seeking opportunities to recruit members had not been as well coordinated as they might have been. JK agreed to look into the background.

JK noted that the Webstats for summer 2015 were almost double last year's figure largely due to very successful citizen science projects such as the Insect Poll.

Council welcomed the appointment of Alison Woollard as Chair of *The Biologist* Editorial Board from October 2015 and thanked outgoing editor Sue Nelson for her excellent work.

Council welcomed the proposals to launch a new series of short textbooks. JK asked for nominations for a potential series editor.

JK invited recommendations for a 2016 fundraising event. Many felt forensic science might be a good topic. MD pointed out that a fundraising activity probably required a celebrity or extremely high profile well-respected scientist.

ACTION: please send nominations for the book series editor to JK.

ACTION: please send proposals for 2016 fundraiser event to JK.

8. Three-Year Plan

8.1 Final draft and feedback

The President invited the MO observers present to offer feedback on the latest draft, stressing that it had evolved from the version circulated earlier in the summer. She noted that RSB staff had tried to take full account of the comments received.

Council agreed that it was very important to reflect suggestions from MOs in the plan. Some simple reordering of sentences and bullet points would help, for example. PG felt we needed to think how we present ourselves more generally to better explain to our MOs what we do.

Council discussed some of the specific language used with a focus on the terms "life scientist", "biologist" and "bioscientist" which were used interchangeably. Many noted that these meant different things to different subsets of the biology community. JK noted that the designed version of the plan would seek to address this with a clear footnote.

Most felt the proposed cover needed amendments to change or remove icons and switch away from the term "Life Science" to "Biology".

Action: JK to obtain further cover designs for the three-year plan

MD asked Council for their view on the proposal by the Physiological Society to establish a "Life Science" special interest group. ETP had not supported this and MD had invited views from the enhanced funding MOs. Most MO observers present were opposed to the proposal. Council agreed that it was not a viable proposition and asked MD to write explaining the decision.

ACTION: MD to arrange a letter to the Physiological Society

PD noted that some of the targets needed more explanation and that the last objectives page would sit better as a paragraph or with more detail. Others agreed.

The President proposed reviewing the next version ahead of printing.

ACTION: JK to amend the plan taking these comments into account and pass to the President for review.

Section B:

9. Report from the Finance Committee

PG reported that a pre-meeting of Finance Committee had provided very helpful suggestions from a new Pension Advisor on the pension deficit, with a good case to ask for the investment strategy to be looked at. Further work had been commissioned.

Finance Committee had reviewed a range of proposals in detail. The CEO had proposed budgets to address the poor cash flow over the next three years and the reduction in reserves well below current policy. It assumed accreditation and membership continued to perform well but was in other respects a prudent set of budgets. Significant new grant income had not been assumed. Although deliverable this would be challenging for staff and for continued high level delivery in all areas.

Finance Committee had tried to take a balanced approach to ensure future growth and impact alongside prudent financial management. Chris Kirk (CK) suggested a link to CPI or RPI in salary discussions. After discussion, Council agreed that a small pot should be made available for salary increases. These changes would decrease total assets over the three years but still lead to growth in 2018 onwards. Pat Goodwin (PG) reminded Council that, as the Board of Trustees, it had ultimate responsibility for signing off budgets.

MD pointed to the need to recast the budgets but estimated that the impact of the above changes would be to increase the 2015-16 deficit. This would reduce the Society's assets over the course of the Plan and cash reserves may fall significantly at some points in the three-year cycle. Cash-flow forecasts will need to be updated. Council noted that the Society was forecast to return to a surplus position in 2017-18 and anticipated further growth thereafter.

Finance Committee had agreed to continue to review the position – and had agreed to meet more regularly over the next 2 years.

Action: Jen Crosk to arrange a Finance Committee meeting prior to each Council meeting for the remainder of 2015 and the whole of 2016.

9.1 Q3 Forecast

Council welcomed the better than budgeted forecast for year end.

9.2 Budget for 2015-16, 2016-2017 & 2017-2018

Council reviewed the proposals as discussed above and agreed the recommendations of Finance committee. The budgets were approved for the next three years subject to amendment to reflect un-freezing one post and inclusion of an annual salary pot increase. Council noted that the budgets originally proposed were prudent and that cash flow was a short term problem over two years, rather than a continued issue. They **AGREED** that the reserves policy could be amended downwards as a temporary measure by Finance committee.

9.3 Cash flow for 2015-16, 2016-2017 & 2017-2018

Council reviewed and **AGREED** the Finance Committee recommendations. The CEO was asked to update cash-flow forecasts and agree them with Finance committee electronically.

9.4 Current grants

Council noted the current position.

10. Governance

10.1 Council noted and **APPROVED** the changes proposed in Paper 10.

10.2 Current draft of the Bylaws

CK thanked Neville Punchard, Ken Allen, David Coates, John Misselbrook, Keith Lawrey, Ana Ilic and the President for their assistance in rewording the Bylaws. CK recommended that they be submitted to Privy Council as drafted (subject to a minor typo).

Council **AGREED** to the amendments to the Bylaws and their submission.

10.3 Revised ToR for Audit & Finance Committee

Council **AGREED** to have common language and definitions throughout governance documents such as *ex-officio* and "observer" as proposed. MD noted that Finance and Audit Committees had now grown to overcome quorum issues. Council **AGREED** that the proposed amendments could be confirmed by email.

11. AoB

There was currently one vacancy on Council following Professor Rosie Hails' resignation, with three additional vacancies in May 2016. Council wished to consider the skills required before any recommendations were made. Vacancies would be announced in February for the May AGM.

Decision: Council AGREED to a discussion on Trustee skills at the December Meeting.

LL needed to leave during the financial discussion and asked for such important items to be taken earlier on the agenda at future meetings.

The next Council Meeting would be held at CDH on 16 December 2015.

Jan Thomas

16 December 2015