

Royal Society Former Staff Association

The future of the Association

Chairman's introduction

I am pleased to send you the Report of the Review Group set up to look at the future of the RSFSA. This explores how the Association might operate in a way that continues to deliver the core benefits that members wish to derive from it, in particular the ability to interact with friends and former colleagues. The Review Group has looked at ways to simplify and streamline how the Association operates to deliver these core benefits, removing some of the administration and a centralised Committee and governance structure. It also looked at dropping some things that are currently done that have lower levels of support or that are disproportionately time consuming to administer.

The Review Group concludes that, with these changes, an Association fit for the future is possible and worthwhile – it would meet what members say they wish to gain from the Association, and enable a more flexible way of organising lunches, visits, social or professional groups, or other activities that members might wish to organise. The Group has done a comprehensive job, and there are fuller details of its discussions and ideas in the accompanying Supplementary Paper.

The Review Group has indicated how a reformed Association might be structured and run, but that is not the same as whether those changes would be successful. The Review Group's work clearly shows that if the members want anything to happen then it needs volunteers from the membership to do so. The answers to Question 4 in the members' survey give some encouragement, as they suggest that there are members willing to offer their time under the right conditions. The Review Group has given a lot of thought to the numbers, time and skills of volunteers who would be required in the new model, and how the necessary tasks can be done in ways that fit better with what members are able to offer. But the positive responses in Question 4 need to turn into real, practical offers to ensure that the required volunteers are forthcoming.

I ask you to read the Report and to give thought to the ideas and issues it raises. Whether the recommendations are taken forward is a matter for the members to decide through the SGM. In considering the Report and deciding on how you will vote, the Committee urges you to assess not just the value of continuing the Association and the benefits that it brings, but also the importance of every member playing his or her part in making it work, from contributing to BTT to volunteering to take on tasks identified at the end of the Report. If member involvement is not forthcoming, then the Association will inevitably close and there will have been little purpose in making the structural and organisational changes proposed in this Report.

If the SGM accepts the Report then work will proceed to develop the proposals for implementation at the 2024 AGM. If the SGM does not accept the Review Group's proposals, or if the call for volunteers recommended by the Review Group in paragraph 12 is unsuccessful, then the Committee will be left with no alternative but to put in place the steps necessary for closing the Association at the 2024 AGM. In those circumstances it will work with members to enable groups of members to set up (or continue) their ways of keeping in touch.

Peter Cooper, Chairman

30 October 2023

Where Next? – a review of the future of the Association

1. The Association has reached a difficult point – although membership numbers are holding up and the finances are healthy, for several understandable reasons it has become increasingly difficult to find members able to give time to joining the Committee to run the Association. The AGM in May 2023 agreed to a short review of the Association to ascertain what might be done to address this situation and 'to bring a viable model for the Association commensurate with its resources to a Special General

Meeting (SGM) to be held by the end of November 2023'. In the absence of an acceptable proposal, the Association would close at the May 2024 AGM. The background and possible reasons for the current situation are discussed in more detail in Section A of the Supplementary Paper.

2. A Review Group composed of members of the Committee plus six other Association members met by Zoom over the July to October 2023 period, carrying out a member survey and exploring various alternatives. (Section B of the Supplementary Paper)

3. The remit of the Review is important. It is not to recommend whether the Association should continue or not – that decision is for members through the SGM. Nor is its purpose to suggest ways that existing members might continue to keep in touch with friends were the Association to close. The aim of the Review is to recommend the best way of operating the Association as a body in a continuing and sustainable way that retains its objectives of enabling social and professional linkage between members, and is open and welcoming to all those who have worked at the Royal Society.

4. The Review Group's first task was to ascertain from members what they most valued from the Association. The Survey asked several questions: which aspects and activities members use and the value members put on them; how the Association provided benefits and outcomes that members would find difficult to find in other ways; and members' views on different ways of operating. By far the strongest reason for their membership given by members of all ages and circumstances was to keep in contact with friends and former colleagues – *Beyond The Terrace* and the membership list were especially valued. Activities such as visits and the annual lunch were appreciated, but primarily for their contributions to meeting and keeping in contact with friends and former colleagues. These views were fairly consistent over all responses, but age and employment status led to noticeable differences in how members valued different ways of operating. The results of the survey are discussed in more detail in Section C of the Supplementary Paper.

5. With this clear message of what members wished to get from the Association, the Review Group set itself targets that would need to be met as far as practicable in a new arrangement for the Association.

- To retain the Association as a means by which those who have worked at the Royal Society can keep in touch with each other to provide social and professional support.
- To retain in some way *BTT* and the membership list as means for members to keep in touch.
- To use modern electronic communications technologies to deliver services more effectively and efficiently and reducing the burden on those volunteering to run them.
- To put in place means to meet the needs of members who might be excluded from benefitting from their membership by an inability to access email or the internet, but not to offer a general welfare service for members in need.

6. At the same time, to be viable the new operating arrangements for the Association must meet four criteria.

- Assured outcomes – the administration and technology used must be designed and shown to deliver the results members want.
- People – no arrangements work without people to operate them, so the arrangements must be based on a realistic assessment of the numbers and skills that will be needed to run them, and there must be reasonable assurance that volunteers will be available and willing to take on tasks.
- Finance – there needs to be certainty that the finances are available to meet the core costs of the new arrangements.
- Governance – the new arrangements need to allow members of the Association to have say in how the arrangements operate or to suggest improvements, and there must be a system of financial and other accountability back to the whole membership.

7. Meeting the objectives of both paragraphs 5 and 6 set the Review Group a considerable challenge. It concluded that the best approach must be one of simplifying and streamlining the organisation, removing central administrative functions where it could, and moving the organisation of activities and functions to small, distributed teams of members, rather than having a centralised Committee. The Association should primarily be a network that links members together. The network would provide an enabling and empowering framework within which members can form whatever groups they wish, and which allows all members to participate in whatever way and to whatever degree they wish. Built into that network would be mechanisms that deliver the benefits of the present BTT and Membership List, and means to assist those unable to access the network electronically. The second area of decentralisation would be in the governance, by moving the Association from one based on formal structures, a centralised Committee and a complex set of Rules and Regulations, to a looser, lightweight structure using the network and small teams to make decisions and carry out the essential tasks.

8. Based on those principles, the Review Group puts forward the following proposal:

- (i) *The future Association will be built around a series of email-based forums – an automated system that links members together by email, enabling members to be contacted as a group or to form their own sub-groups, for discussion and exchange of news and information, or any other purpose members wish.***
- (ii) *The automated system running the email-based forums will also deliver the benefits of the present BTT and Membership List; means will be put in place to provide both of these to those members unable to access the network.***
- (iii) *The Association will not arrange activities centrally, such as social visits, the annual lunch, professional seminars, etc. Members (or groups of members) could decide through the email-based forums that they wish to arrange an event of this or some other nature, and would take on that organisation themselves.***
- (iv) *The welfare of members will remain an important objective of the new Association, carried out through the email-based forums plus personal communication between members. No single person will have responsibility for welfare matters, nor will the Association offer welfare grants. The Welfare Fund will be used to meet the costs of ensuring that members unable to access the electronic network can receive a printed BTT and be kept informed about the Association through the post.***
- (v) *The governance and management will move to a looser, lightweight structure operating through small working groups and member consensus via the email-based forums.***
- (vi) *The current financial reserves will fund the transition for up to five years, and no subscription will be charged over that period; a decision will need to be taken in due course (we recommend in three years) what form the Association will take in the longer term, and how it is funded, based on the success and outcomes of the new arrangements.***

9. Section D of the Supplementary Paper examines in more detail the thinking behind these proposals and explores how each part might be delivered. Section D is not a blueprint for exactly what will happen – that requires more exploration, testing and discussion if the SGM agrees to follow the model in paragraph 8 above. Section D is intended as a ‘proof of concept’ – that the proposals could, in principle, operate in a way that would deliver the required objectives of paragraph 8.

10. But an essential requirement for the proposed model to work is that there will be sufficient volunteers to operate it, remembering that a core purpose of the Review was to find a solution to the lack of volunteers taking on roles in running the Association. The Review Group’s proposals aim to achieve this by simplifying the processes and using technology more effectively. But these systems still need people to run them. For example, email-based forums can offer more efficient mechanisms by which members communicate and share information, but those forums take people to run and maintain them. A structured and edited BTT needs people to commission, edit and lay out articles, and to print and distribute copies to those not on email. Without an Hon. Secretary, someone must

volunteer to maintain and distribute a membership list. And there must be a way of paying for all those things to happen – removing the need for Officers and a Committee slims the structure but we still need to ensure that decisions on spending members' money are taken responsibly. The Review Group believes the way forward is to break up the work into smaller packages requiring smaller amounts of people's time, which can be done wherever and at whatever times are convenient to the individuals involved, thereby making volunteering a more practicable proposition.

11. The Review Group has made an assessment of the likely numbers of tasks that will need to be done by volunteers, and the skills and time each will take, based on the above model and the ideas for its implementation contained in Section D of the Supplementary Paper.

- (a) **Network administration** – looking after the smooth running of Groups.io, dealing with members' access and changes in their logins, potentially some moderation and electronic tidying: 2 to 3 volunteers, 2–4 hrs/month, likely more at introduction, some IT skills or experience.
- (b) **Beyond The Terrace** – editorial team, commissioning of material, creation of printable format and its distribution: 3 volunteers, working a total of 26 hrs/issue. In addition to the BTT editor, one editorial assistant to help with commissioning and writing, and the web editor to design and implement the BTT online presence.
- (c) **Membership List** – holding and maintaining a document, calling for changes, printing and distributing by email and post: 1 volunteer, 2–3 hrs/month (more when circulating a new list), word processing skills, access to a printer.
- (d) **Finance team** – signatories to bank account, approving and making payments, reporting annually to membership: 3 volunteers, 2–3 hrs/month, comfortable with dealing with money, operating a simple spreadsheet and online banking.

Some members might be willing to do take on more than one role at a time, but in order to make the model work the Review Group estimates that we will need at least 10 members offering to take on tasks. The Review Group hopes that the more flexible ways of working, together with the smaller scale of tasks, will encourage more members to offer to take on these roles. **But the Review Group stresses that without sufficient volunteers, this – or any other arrangement – will not work.**

12. **The Review Group recommends that if these proposals are accepted by the SGM, steps are immediately taken to identify potential volunteers to take on these tasks.** First and foremost, this will indicate whether the move to the new model is likely to be successful. Members should be asked to talk to members of the Review Group about what would be involved and to give commitments of support. If such support cannot be obtained within a reasonable time (say the end of 2023) then that calls into question the viability of the change and the Committee would need to review whether it was wise to continue the work of developing the model for implementation in May 2024. A second and more positive reason for identifying volunteers early is that they can then be involved in the steps of setting up those systems and roles – establishing a trial network, for instance, which all members could test out, facilitating a smooth transition from May 2024.

30 October 2023