

The Fellowship Council - An End of Term “Impact” Report

The Fellowship Council is in its third year of existence. It was created in 2009 as a replacement for the former Advisory Council to be a representative forum for Fellows of the RSA, with the core aim of promoting more effective working relationships between all aspects of the RSA, and specifically ensuring that the Fellowship’s voice is heard by the Trustee Board and by RSA staff. Initially it comprised 20 Fellows elected within the regions/nations of the RSA and 20 Fellows appointed by the Trustee Board to ensure diversity and representation of the wide range of activities and interests across the RSA.

In 2010 I was elected Chair of the Fellowship Council, with Irene Campbell as Deputy Chair. Irene and I saw the role of the Fellowship Council as facilitating a more constructive dialogue between Fellows and John Adam Street, working with Council, staff, Trustees and Fellows in an even-handed way to achieve this and resolve conflicting visions. Our aim has been to enable Fellows, through the Council, to have a genuine influence on RSA strategy and operations. Most importantly, while learning the lessons of the past, we needed to have an open and constructive discussion about the way forward as we seek to increase the activity and engagement of Fellows.

It takes time for any new body to settle down, but looking back over the first couple of years we can note a number of areas where the Council has already had a significant impact through the work of its members and working groups. These include:

- Improving relations between regional/national Committees and Panels and RSA headquarters at John Adam Street, with regular meetings of Regional/National Chairs to discuss current issues and the working relationship with John Adam Street, to exchange ideas on increasing the engagement of Fellows; and at the same time to inform the Fellowship Council of the views expressed.
- Input on the Trustee Board through two Fellowship Council members, elected to these positions, who also report back to the Council on matters discussed at the Trustee Board.
- The development of the Fellows’ Charter.
- Active involvement in the Governance Advisory Group which was established by the December 2010 AGM, with its recommendations being approved by a substantial majority of Fellows at the October 2011 AGM. These included:
 - a recommendation for the Fellowship Council to be composed of 35 elected Fellows (including an elected Chair and Fellowship Councillors for each of the 14 Regions/Nation plus 7 elected “At Large” Fellowship Councillors), with a further 5 appointed to reflect diversity and representation of the wide range of Fellows’ activities.
 - A restructuring of the governance of the 14 RSA Regions/Nations in the UK and Ireland (based on the Fellowship Council’s review of regional/national structures) and a new approach to enhancing Fellows’ activities and engagement outside John Adam Street through the creation of integrated teams to support this.
 - Work to improve the information and guidance available to potential candidates for elections for the Fellowship Council and the new Regional/National Teams.
- At the request of the Fellowship Council the Trustee Board established a group to review resourcing of Fellowship activity and engagement which reported in May 2012. The group, which included four Fellowship Council members, considered the growing activity in the Fellowship and the new structures created to support this and recommended additional staffing (in the form of two extra Regional Programme Managers to support activity in the 14 Regions/Nations in UK and Ireland), £40k development funding from 2013/14 to support developmental activity in the Regions/Nations, enhanced Catalyst provision to link more closely with the funding of Fellows’ projects in the Regions/Nations, funding for training of the leaders of the new regional/national teams and enhanced support in terms of technology (including discussion spaces, web-pages, networking and video-conferencing) and of branding, PR and media relations. The Trustee Board has accepted these recommendations.

- Input and continuing support for the very successful Catalyst Fund and the associated Skills Bank, which has provided financial (so far over £160,000) and other support for a wide range of Fellows' projects. Encouragement and support to extend the reach of Catalyst through close co-operation with the new Regional/National Teams and existing regional/national Venture Funds.
- An active working group on Digital Engagement, which has already produced some useful guidelines, and is represented (along with the Fellowship Council Chair) on the RSA's Technology Programme Board, which is developing and implementing a new strategy to support the wide range of activities, including a new database of the Fellowship, one aspect of which will improve opportunities for Fellows to contact those with similar interests.
- A working group looking at ways to enhance engagement of Fellows across the RSA.
- FC members have been instrumental in creating thematic groups - for example, on Education and on Youth.
- A number of practical improvements in communications and support from John Adam Street, with a close working relationship between the Council and its Officers and the Fellowship Department.

More recently it is satisfying to note that members of the Fellowship Council will be involved in the selection of the new Chair of the RSA Trustee Board who will take over from Luke Johnston in October 2012.

At the last Council meeting with its current membership in May we reviewed what had been achieved and comparisons were drawn with the previous Advisory Council, largely viewed as a "talk-shop" with little influence. Members noted that over the past couple of years the Fellowship Council had developed as a body to be consulted by the Trustee Board and staff, was now genuinely involved in considering the future direction of the RSA and had a real influence through its discussions and decisions, its Working Groups, the work of its Chair and Deputy Chair and its representatives on the Trustee Board. The new governance structure being introduced, integrating the work of Regional/National Teams, the Fellowship Council and staff should further improve engagement and input from Fellows into the strategy and operations of the RSA.

We have built sound foundations but there is more to be done: improved communications with Fellows to make sure they can take advantage of the new support for engagement and input and feel they are part of a responsive organisation. There is a need to find ways to share good practice across the RSA wherever it happens and to link more closely central projects and research with Fellows outside London. There is a huge amount of activity across the Fellowship and we have to find ways of communicating this as well as we already publicise activities based at the House - but without swamping people with too much information, and recognising that each Fellow has different hopes and expectations.

The newly constituted Fellowship Council in September will be able to concentrate on all this and on stimulating Fellow activity across the RSA - and without needing to spend time on a major governance review!

Irene and I have been to a number of meetings with Fellows across the UK and will also be attending a number of the regional/national AGMs. Our aim is to communicate to Fellows all the changes that have happened to enhance input from Fellows, to listen to them and to respond to questions. It is essential that the Fellowship Council keeps in touch with the experience and views of Fellows wherever they are based.

Bob Porrer, Chair, Fellowship Council

June 2012