

# **Royal Astronomical Society**

## **Honorary Auditors' Report – March 2008**

### **1. Introduction**

This report was compiled following a visit to Burlington House on 11 March 2008. The visit included a tour of the refurbished building and one-to-one discussions with the Executive Secretary, Treasurer and all members of Burlington House staff present on the day. As in previous years, this report gives a commentary on the last twelve months and our views on future developments. We were pleased to see that at the last AGM, the bye-laws were changed to provide a more relevant description of the role of the Honorary Auditors to “deliver a personal report on the resources, goals, structures and activities of the Society”.

### **2. Burlington House**

The auditors were able to tour the building whilst the refurbishment programme was in progress last year. It was therefore very pleasing to see the finished product, and to learn that it was on time and well within budget. The refurbishments are very impressive, moving the society's premises into the 21<sup>st</sup> century without destroying the character of the building. In particular, the provision of the on-site lecture theatre and large meeting room is already proving very valuable.

As with all building projects, it was only when the staff moved back in in October 2007 that it was realised that there were still problems of “snagging”. This made the period from October until Christmas particularly difficult for staff. Although most of the problems seem to have been resolved, there are still difficulties in the IT area, including the telephone system, that need to be ironed out.

### **3. Finances**

The Society's finances continue to be very well managed and appear to be in good shape, both in terms of the reserves and the current account. We were pleased to hear that a major and complex VAT issue had been successfully resolved and that the prospect of open access publishing was not considered to be the threat to the Society's income that it was last year given the possibility of converting it from a subscription to an author pay model.

### **4. Membership**

Recent initiatives in this area appear to be bearing fruit. The Society's membership continues to grow, standing at around 3300 – an increase of approximately 1% on the previous year. We are pleased to see that the Society continues to address the service it delivers to various constituencies of membership but we recognise that the issue of introducing new categories of membership is a very difficult one that the Membership Committee have been particularly exercised by. A very promising avenue however is that of “friends” of the Society and this certainly deserves the detailed consideration it is receiving. The constitution of an International Committee is also an interesting and potentially important development. In general, the upgrading of the membership database and analysis of the results of the current questionnaire to members should prove great aids in monitoring and enhancing provision for members.

### **5. Publications**

In general, the Society's main journals seem to be performing well. Although the impact factor of MNRAS has dropped back a little and needs to be monitored, that of GJI has increased markedly. One factor here is the reduction in publication times due to the successful operation of the electronic submission system, and also due to the dedication of the Editorial Boards and staff. The performance of the latter has been particularly impressive over the last year against the very difficult background of the tragic death of John Randall in January.

## **6. The Library**

This was one of the most challenging aspects of the move to and from Burlington House during the refurbishment and the staff coped well with the disruption and additional work this entailed. The main concerns now centre around the reduction in staff effort when the assistant librarian retires in May 2008. It is apparent that the cataloguing process will not have been completed by then and there are worries that the day-to-day functioning of the library thereafter may be compromised. Several aspects then become important if the assistant post is not to be replaced. These comprise provision of efficient computer-based library systems, appropriate staff training and the potential to bring in additional staff temporarily to undertake specific tasks (as has been done in the past we believe).

## **7. Policy and Promotion**

The STFC funding crisis has dominated this area of the Society's work since November. We feel that the Society has been very fortunate to have a President who has proved so committed to presenting the views of our community at all levels, ably aided by the Officers and staff. Of the latter, it has also proved very fortuitous that the Society now has the services of a very capable and dedicated Policy Officer. Overall, we believe that the RAS has played a very valuable and high profile role in an extremely difficult and unprecedented situation, and of course continues to do so.

Although other normal activities, such as the handling of publicity through press releases, have continued, there is no doubt that the STFC situation has inevitably taken attention and resources away from these. However, we were pleased to note that preparations for IYA 2009 are continuing, including a full-time, fixed-term appointment in support of the Society's activities in this important period. In this context, we encourage the Society to continue to look for special initiatives to support in the area of education and public engagement throughout IYA 2009.

A very notable success has been the public lecture series. Indeed, on the day of the audit visit, the lecture hall was full well ahead of time and people were (reluctantly) being turned away. We understand this has been the case each time but now the overflow is being accommodated via video links to the new Council and Fellows' rooms.

## **8. Staff**

As noted above, we were saddened to hear of the death of John Randall who was a very long-standing and valued member of the editorial staff. There were also problems with building snagging issues, particularly in the run-up to Christmas that presented a wide range of difficulties to staff. Finally, there is also concern over future staffing of the library in particular. However, overall, we found morale to be very high among the staff. Indeed, they went out of their way to apologise for, and make light of, any seemingly negative remarks they had.

Home working seemed to be efficient and effective for appropriate staff. However, it means that there are fewer staff around Burlington House at any given time, and the opportunity to share tasks is a little reduced. In addition, there is obviously somewhat reduced staff contact overall. In the light of this, the auditors suggest that consideration be given to an annual Burlington House staff Away Day, possibly comprising a business meeting in the morning and a social event in the afternoon. When this concept was put to individual staff they seemed to think it would be a positive move in aiding planning and enhancing staff cohesion.

## **9. Concluding Remarks**

As detailed above, the Society is in good health. The refurbishment programme in general has gone remarkably well, although there are a few teething problems with some aspects that will hopefully be resolved soon. The RAS has played a high profile and valuable part in representing the community in the ongoing STFC funding crisis. When this is over, we hope that the Society's attention can move back towards capitalising on the opportunities for promotion of our subject, and hence the whole of basic science, provided by IYA 2009. To this end, and more generally, we would reiterate last year's suggestion that another planning day for Council and senior staff be held at some point within the next twelve months.

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