CEO Viewpoint

As 2018 began, we were delighted to welcome Professor Sir Pete Downes as the Society’s new President. Pete takes over from Professor Sir David Baulcombe who has steered the Society through a key period of our strategy, including embracing a more hands-on presidency as Chair of the new Council of Trustees, following the changes agreed as part of the governance review. It has been a pleasure to work with David and I would like to thank him for his service to the Society and for the considerable support he has given to me and the organisation’s staff.

Prior to taking up the presidency, Pete joined us for the Trustees’ strategy retreat, which was held in November 2017. The Society’s current strategy runs to the end of 2018, and this retreat was the first step in considering our priorities for the period 2019–2021. I would like to echo Pete and David’s thanks to our members who participated in the 2017 membership survey ahead of the retreat. More information about the results of the survey will appear in the April issue. The needs of our members are central to the formation of our strategy, and ensuring that the Society supports current and future molecular biologists, across academia and industry, both in the UK and internationally, is fundamental to our continuing evolution. We also considered the need to diversify the membership base, to include others not currently represented in large numbers, such as technicians and apprentices. There was also a reaffirmed commitment to meeting the needs of early career researchers, and Dr Dominika Gruszka, the early career researcher representative on the Council of Trustees, will be spearheading this initiative.

This year, we also welcome Professor Frank Sargent as our Honorary Treasurer, succeeding Dr Nick Watmough. Nick’s term as Honorary Treasurer coincided with a period of organizational restructuring and significant financial challenges which he handled with incredible skill and diplomacy. His efforts have enabled us to build a much more sustainable and modern base for future Group activities. I would like to thank him for his dedication to the role and the many hours of wise counsel he has offered to me as CEO and MD over the past five years.

A number of key events took place at the end of 2017. To demonstrate the value of a collaborative approach to the promotion of the life sciences, the Societies in Charles Darwin House held an event celebrating International Coffee Day, very ably curated and managed by James Brown, our Education and Public Engagement Manager, and Jennifer Freer, an intern jointly employed by the co-owner Societies. This included an evening event featuring talks showcasing the breadth of life sciences research on coffee, and an ‘open house’ the following day where members of the public were invited to learn more about the science of coffee while enjoying samples sourced from local businesses. You can read more about the event via Jennifer’s article on The Biochemist Blog (bit.ly/2EamuIs).

We were also delighted to see the level of interest in our debate, ‘Genome editing: where do we draw the line?’, held in collaboration with RSB at the Royal Institution as the showcase event during 2017’s Biology Week. Over 400 guests attended (with a further 2,937 people reached through live streaming) and heard a panel of experts debate the science and ethics of genome editing, exploring important questions about the potential scope of genome editing techniques, and the ethical implications of where these might take us in the future.

We are also looking forward to an exciting year in 2018. The Society’s new online training portal launched in October with our first online course, R for Biochemists 101, led by Dr Paul Brennan from Cardiff University. This event was fully subscribed within 24 hours of going live. The next opportunity to participate in the course will begin on 5 March. You can find more information about all of our training courses on our website (bit.ly/2na8vKE).

In addition to our training courses, our programme of scientific meetings continues in 2018 with forthcoming conferences including New Horizons in ESCRT Biology (April, London), the 83rd Harden Conference, Autophagy – from Molecules to Disease II (June, Warwickshire) and The Biology and Physics of Bacterial Chromosome Organisation 2018 (June, Leiden).

Our popular Science Communication Competition is now open for 2018 entries. This is a great opportunity for undergraduate and postgraduate students to showcase their talents in two categories; written and video. Prizes include a mentoring session with a professional science communicator, so please promote this opportunity for students throughout your institutions. The closing date is 16th April 2018. Further information is available here: bit.ly/2n9nT9U.

Applications are also open for our Scientific Outreach Grants. These grants of up to £1000 support scientific outreach activities that communicate the excitement of molecular bioscience to young people and the community. If you’re thinking of applying, you might find it interesting to read reports from previous recipients. These are available on our website, along with all of the information that you will need in order to apply (bit.ly/2Fczwo2). The closing date is 9th April 2018.