Royal Society of Biology News

A busy first quarter for science in 2018

The first quarter of 2018 has been very busy, not just for the Royal Society of Biology (RSB) but for the UK science community as a whole.

In early January Sam Gyimah MP was appointed Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, and on the 1 April, UK Research and Innovation became an official body bringing together the seven research councils, Innovate UK and Research England.

We continue to work with our Member Organizations, including the Biochemical Society, to represent the bioscience community and build strong and open dialogue with the new Ministerial team and with UKRI.

In January I gave evidence to the Science and Technology Select Committee of the House of Lords, as part of their inquiry into Life Sciences and the Industrial Strategy. It was an opportunity to discuss the need for a government champion to take responsibility for the strategy, and to stress the breadth of the life sciences including the agri-tech food, environmental science, medicine and pharmaceutical sectors and plant sciences, among others.

All this built upon our consultation response to the Industrial Strategy Green Paper, to which the Biochemical Society also contributed. The industrial strategy will continue to influence public policy for some time, and active engagement with the Government and business remains a key activity.

The RSB also continues to engage on issues relevant to Brexit with the Government, through the Ministerial-led High Level Forum on Brexit and Science. I recently represented the RSB at the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee summit meeting on Brexit and Science. We highlighted the clarity required urgently by bioscientists, and indeed all scientists, regarding movement of people, and a better functioning Tier 2 visa system.

February saw our first policy lunchbox of the year, ran in partnership with several Member Organizations including the Biochemical Society. We welcomed Naomi Weir, Deputy Director of the Campaign for Science and Engineering, to discuss the sector response to the UK Government’s Industrial Strategy, and how we can make the most of it.

In March we celebrated British Science Week, with two of the biggest events in our policy calendar: Voice of the Future and STEM for Britain, both taking place at the Houses of Parliament. These events highlight the perspective of young students and researchers directly to Parliamentarians, and are also key reminders of the seriousness and energy with which the next generation bring to their work.

Voice of the Future is a unique opportunity for young scientists to ask their own questions about science and policy to MPs, similar to the way a Select Committee would collect evidence. Nearly 50 young researchers and school children were put forward by the RSB and partner organisations, including the Biochemical Society, to pose their questions to the Commons Science & Technology Select Committee, the Shadow Minister for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Chi Onwurah MP, and the Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, Sam Gyimah MP.

STEM for Britain, the annual poster competition for early career researchers, also saw over 250 scientists, including over 50 bioscientists, present their research to MPs. Judges assess the clarity with which presenters communicate their research and its relevance, and it is another reminder of the importance of engaging well with policymakers.

Outside of policy, during the spring term our school competitions took place, with more than 7,800 students taking part in the British Biology Olympiad in February, and another 40,000 competing in the Biology Challenge in March.

These competitions offer school pupils the chance to stretch their biology knowledge and skills, and we hope many more will take part in the Intermediate Biology Olympiad this summer.

In Higher Education news, we were delighted when the Centre for Sport, Exercise and Life Sciences at Coventry University became the first institution to receive RSB Doctoral Training Accreditation. This new award recognizes programmes which contain a solid academic foundation in biological knowledge and key skills, and satisfactorily prepares graduates for future employment.

In outreach and engagement, the Biochemical Society and other Member Organizations, took part in this year’s Big Bang Fair in Birmingham, speaking to hundreds of school children about the 21st century life science challenges, and potential bioscience careers.

All of this has been happening alongside the usual bustling activity of supporting our membership, and working hard to represent the biosciences as a whole.

Our partnership with the Biochemical Society is so integral to many of our activities and we very much enjoy sharing these successes with you, its membership. We look forward to continuing our joint ventures this year, and thank the Biochemical Society for its valued engagement.