Strengthening the bridges between the public and policymakers

Bringing together the sciences, as well as presenting and discussing collective views with policymakers has been a big feature of the recent, typically busy months, at RSB. Indeed, the summer calendar has been geared around events big and small to achieve this.

In June, we hosted Parliamentary Links Day, which brought together members of the biosciences and STEM communities, policymakers, politicians, and other sector leaders to discuss the current climate for science and how to build the best future.

The event, opened by the Speaker, included keynote addresses from Norman Lamb MP, Chair of the Commons S&T Select Committee and Chi Onwurah MP, Shadow Minister for Industrial Strategy Science and Innovation, with panel discussions hosting sector leaders to discuss the strategy and its delivery.

In addition, Rebecca Endean, Director of Strategy and the newly formed UKRI, and Dr Patrick Vallance, newly-appointed Government Chief Scientific Adviser had an opportunity to give their first addresses during the event.

Links Day is an important opportunity for the science community to engage with policymakers and sector leaders. The session featured two dynamic panels discussing the strategy, its outcomes and its delivery, with the audience too being a very active participant in the discussions. Overall the day allowed the sharing of ideas and views with the policy experts – a satisfying aim to achieve.

The development of the Industrial Strategy of course continues beyond Links Day, and I was pleased to see recognition of our evidence and recommendations in the report published by the House of Lords’ Science and Technology Committee following their inquiry into the Strategy. We highlighted that there was a real potential for missed opportunities if an insufficiently broad definition of life science was used throughout, and the first recommendation of the Lords report is that Government should identify areas for sector deals across the life sciences in addition to health and biomedical areas.

We will continue to emphasize the importance of recognizing the breadth of the lifesciences, which should always include biotechnology, agriculture, plant science, animal science and climate change mitigation and adaptation, among others, and provide opportunities for collaboration across specialisms.

In smaller and specialist meetings we have been taking the opportunity to put across the bioscience views and priorities, for example with Lord Henley, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at BEIS, and with groups such as the Heads of University Biomedical Sciences. Being able to draw upon the examples and data from our member community continues to be a huge asset in flying the flag for bioscience and the support, policy, training environment, and regulation we need.

As well as reaching the policy professionals and Government policymakers, we’ve also been busy delivering outreach and engagement projects to a variety of audiences. We aim to help empower members and volunteers to share and discuss different bioscience topics with different audiences, through activities we run and events we attend, alongside the programme of school competitions we offer.

The RSB special interest group, UK Biology Competitions, held the Education Awards ceremony in July, to celebrate some of the 62,000 pupils who took part in our three school competitions this year alongside outstanding biology teachers and schools.

The ceremony exemplifies not only the popularity of our school competitions, but how they are valued by schools, by us, and by those who will hopefully be the next generation of bioscientists.

Our outreach and engagement work with The Biology Big Top, a collaboration of engagement teams across Member Organisations including the Biochemical Society, has been busy attending events, festivals, exhibitions and more, stimulating conversation and building enthusiasm for the biosciences. This year we hope that Biology Week will exceed last year’s total of 100 events taking place worldwide, crowding in the enthusiasm of the community.

On a broader note, we will be holding our first ever outreach and engagement symposium in the autumn, in partnership with the Biochemical Society and others, bringing together the professional and volunteer biosciences outreach community to learn, share best practice, and build ideas.

Links Day and Biology Week may look far apart, but they are both very much about the totality of bringing the biosciences community closer together, bringing scientists and policymakers closer together, and also reaching out to new audiences too. Together we can have enhanced impact on those issues that unite us all and affect us all equally.

The Biochemical Society and its members are essential partners in this and I look forward to our next set of work together.