CEO Viewpoint

In 2009, the Biochemical Society, together with the Society for Experimental Biology and the British Ecological Society, co-located to a new, jointly-owned premises at 12 Roger Street with the vision of creating a bio-sciences hub: Charles Darwin House. The then Society of Biology had just been formed as a result of a merger between the Institute of Biology and the Biosciences Federation, and the plans for the hub were developed in the context of a life sciences sector looking towards opportunities for greater integration with both the new Society of Biology and other sister Societies. It was also hoped that by occupying the same premises, the co-owner societies of CDH would be able to work in closer collaboration, while also benefitting from any cost efficiencies generated by shared services. The ground floor conference centre was envisaged as an income-generating centre which would offer meetings space to both the co-owners and external clients.

At the outset, the Biochemical Society provided a number of services to CDH Ltd (the company created to manage the buildings), including premises management, IT support and accountancy, at below market rates, thereby effectively subsidizing the business. This was at the time part of the Society’s strategic commitment (as stated in the 2013 strategic plan), both to the bioscience hub, and to the goal of exploring federation, integration or merger with the Royal Society of Biology by 2024. Since its foundation, the hub has been joined by three more co-owners – the Society for General Microbiology (now the Microbiology Society); the new Royal Society of Biology; and, most recently, the Society for Applied Microbiology. The partnership also acquired a second building, Charles Darwin House 2 (107 Gray’s Inn Road) which has been used primarily as an investment property, with office space rented to other scientific organizations.

Over recent years it has become evident that the potential benefits of shared services have not been realized. In addition, substantial increases in business rates meant that generating income from external clients of the conference centre was no longer viable and this income stream disappeared. The cost base of CDH Ltd has increased significantly as a result, and now requires additional financial support from the Society and other co-owners.

The Chief Executive’s and Trustee representatives of the co-owners held a summit meeting on 23 April to discuss these concerns and to try and find a route forward to solve the prevailing financial issues, as well as trying to find a more effective way to manage the buildings. Many possible avenues were explored both at the Society’s Council and similar meetings of other co-owning Societies, however at a subsequent meeting in July, it was unilaterally agreed that the ‘biosciences hub’ experiment had not worked. As a result, it has been agreed that both buildings will be sold, the CDH partnership will be dissolved and that the Biochemical Society will seek a new home.

While this is the end of an era, the move also represents an exciting new chapter for the Society. Throughout these considerations, we have emphasized the importance of continuing to seek opportunities for collaboration, which is an important part of how we work. We do not anticipate that our collaborative partnerships and projects will be adversely affected by this move – indeed, many of the Society’s successful collaborations to date have taken place with societies beyond CDH such as the Nutrition Society, British Pharmacological Society and The Physiological Society - and we will continue to seek out opportunities to partner with other organizations and leverage opportunities for strategic partnership wherever possible.

Undoubtedly, readers will be asking what is next for the Society? For now, concrete details are yet to emerge, and a variety of options are being explored, but I will keep readers abreast in this column as details of the move to new premises materialize.

Whilst physical co-location has not worked well as a catalyst for change and integration and this must be acknowledged in terms of the best use of our charitable resources, the Biochemical Society is proud to have played a major role in spearheading the idea of a more collaborative sector. Finding new and innovative ways to expand our influence across the sector as a whole remains an objective central to our purpose which is recognized in our current and future strategy.