

Friday March 1st 2024

Dear Professor Snowden

Thank you for taking the time to meet with us on Thursday 15 February 2024, together with past Fellows Alex Barker and Michael Solomon, as representatives of a group of concerned Fellows and past Fellows.

It was good to finally meet you in person, following your exchange of correspondence with Tim Eyles as Chair, beginning with your letter of 24 November 2023. As explained at our meeting, all your emails and the RSA's replies have been fully shared and discussed with the Board of Trustees at each stage of the correspondence. I can also confirm that the matters you have raised have been taken seriously.

As discussed at the beginning of our meeting, Neil and I are representatives of the RSA Board of Trustees – I as Deputy Chair and Neil Beagrie as Chair of the Fellowship Council, and all Trustees have a genuine desire to understand these matters. We hope that the meeting gave you a chance to elaborate and clarify the points expressed via email to date. We have listened carefully to the points you have raised.

We thank you for a frank, open and positive discussion. It is always good to meet other Fellows as well as past Fellows, who share the same passion for the important social change mission and work of the RSA.

Transparency and openness are key values that are fundamental to the RSA, so we were particularly concerned to hear that within the group you represent, there appears to be a perceived lack of RSA transparency and openness across a number of areas. It was helpful for us to better understand the areas that have given rise to this perception so that we may address any misunderstandings and take proactive steps to address them.

Since our meeting, Neil and I have reflected on the matters and suggestions that you have raised, made further enquiries and discussed the matters raised with the RSA Board of Trustees.

Based on our discussion on 15 February, we have identified three key areas:

1. Continue to expand our open, transparent and deliberate communication with Fellows
2. Openly share our robust processes and criteria related to recruitment
3. Independent and externally benchmarked staff research & insights

Further details are provided on each of these areas below.

1. Continue to expand our open, transparent and deliberate communication with Fellows

You referenced your dissatisfaction with your experience of the 2023 AGM, you also expressed a desire to understand how Circle is moderated and asked for more overt communication of Trustee changes.

a) AGM: Regarding the AGM, you expressed concern that the 2023 AGM was not as open as you would like it to be for Fellows. Your concern was driven by having an online virtual meeting only in 2023, a desire to have Fellow chat open for everyone to read and respond to in real time, and a perception that due to time constraints the questions that were not raised in the meeting were not responded to.

As many Fellows will be aware RSA events have been targeted by the IWGB and a number have been disrupted over the course of the last year. We sought to minimise that risk, without any additional bias or favour, at the 2023 AGM to ensure an uninterrupted experience for Fellows.

Our online AGM is designed to optimise the geographic reach for all our 31,000+ Fellows. We are only able to accommodate up to 180 Fellows in the Great Room at RSA House, so online will remain the best way for the vast majority of our Fellows to attend the AGM. That said, we will always try to accommodate and respect Fellow preferences and provide the opportunity to those based in London who wish to attend in person.

As discussed, it is important to note that all Fellows who asked questions at the AGM, whether during the live meeting or afterwards have received a direct and personalised reply.

We have recommended that in the future all Q&A at the AGM is transparently shared with the Fellowship. We have also recommended that all Q&A from the AGM 2023 is also openly shared.

b) Circle: As you know, Circle is an exciting new online platform, that was developed in direct response to Fellow feedback, to make it easier for Fellows to connect and work collaboratively.

As discussed in our meeting, 99% of posts on Circle are open and remain unmoderated. Indeed critical postings within the guidelines remain up on Circle and Fellows continue to comment openly on them.

Fellows are encouraged to freely express their views within the community guidelines. These guidelines were co-developed with Fellows and continue to be reviewed on a regular basis based on Fellows' feedback. The 1% of moderated exceptions, are typically on posts that adopt a tone that is hostile to others and inconsistent with the RSA's values for open but respectful and polite debate or attempting to promote personal commercial interests.

As a new platform we are all becoming familiar with how to use it to best effect and the Fellowship Team will continue to monitor and support the Circle community of Fellows

to ensure they feel respected and that it continues to grow as a safe space to openly collaborate.

c) Communication of Trustee Changes

Our historical practice is to update the external facing platforms, including the RSA website and Journal listing, which will continue. Your request to have more overt and wide communication of Trustee changes is noted.

Indeed, we believe the significant voluntary work and commitment to the RSA that Fellows take on as Trustees deserves to be more openly recognised both at the beginning as well as at the end of their tenure.

As discussed, there are two Trustees who have recently stepped down from the Fellowship Council and the Board. Their resignations, which were due to competing work pressures, were of course communicated to the Fellowship Council and the Trustees.

We are fortunate in having strong bench strength and experience in our Trustee Board and Fellowship Council Trustees. As you know, Neil Beagrie, who has worked as Deputy Chair of the Fellowship Council for the last two years, has now stepped up to take on the Chair of the Fellowship Council and joined the Trustee Board in January 2024. He brings a wealth of experience as a long-standing Fellow, as RSA Fellowship Councillor for the SW Region and Chair of the Salisbury RSA Fellows Network. This has ensured strong continuity and a smooth transition. The second Trustee vacancy is expected to be filled in March 2024.

You will appreciate that it can be difficult to balance full time work with voluntary RSA responsibilities especially if one is serving on both the Fellowship Council and as a Trustee on the Board.

As a result of your feedback, we have requested that in the future we announce, thank and recognise the contribution of Trustees when they step down, as well as announce and get to know the new Trustees by featuring them on their appointment. Communication would be on the most relevant Fellow communication platforms (for example such as Circle, RSA Journal and in Fellows' newsletters etc). So you can expect to see more frequent and open communication on any Trustee changes.

2. Openly share our robust processes and criteria related to recruitment

As a board we are extremely conscious of our obligations to ensure good governance, and this is also a key priority for the RSA as a charity subject to regulation by the Charity Commission. We have open, inclusive and robust processes in place for all recruitment.

You requested more information related to Board, Staff and Fellowship recruitment, which is provided below.

a) Board Recruitment

Board Trustees are recruited in a robust open and transparent process in accordance with the RSA Bye-laws and Charity Commission guidelines.

As discussed, our objective is to identify and attract the required mix of skills, experience, knowledge and diversity to support the RSAs charitable purpose and ensure continued strong governance.

We appreciate your suggestions regarding youth representation, which is already a priority for the RSA and in particular the Fellowship Team. We have in the recent past had a Trustee and Fellowship Councillor under the age of 25 and are keen to extend youth representation. Indeed, the RSA has already established a Youth Advisory Group with 13 young Fellows and we hope to encourage our young Fellows to apply to sit on the Fellowship Council and the Board as vacancies arise.

We also appreciate your feedback regarding maintaining representation of experience across Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. To that end, we already have a diverse Trustee Board that brings a wealth of experience across both the public, private and third sectors including Arts, Technology, Finance, Entrepreneurship, ESG, Communication, Membership, HR & People development, Education and Global.

You noted that that some Trustees can be co-opted by the Board. Consistent with Charity Commission Guidelines, the RSA Bye-laws enable Board Trustees to be elected and co-opted, with strict guidelines for each. All Board Trustees must be approved at the AGM. The average voting percentage from Fellows in favour of current trustees stands at 96%.

We periodically review the RSA Bye-laws to ensure they fully reflect best practice in terms of governance and the Nominations and Governance Panel will do so again during 2024. The RSA Bye-laws are fully transparent and accessible and can be downloaded from the RSA website. Any proposed changes to the Bye-laws are put to a resolution at an AGM, together with the rationale, and voted on by Fellows.

b) Staff Recruitment

Our recruitment process and policies support an open, merit-based recruitment process designed to attract a diverse slate of candidates for all roles.

Typically, roles are advertised internally through MS Teams and externally through a variety of job boards including the RSA website, LinkedIn and others.

While the interview panel requirements and stages are dependent on different circumstances and requirements by role, our aim is to ensure diversity of the interview panel and candidate pool.

Our Applicant Tracking System enables shortlisting based on key role specifications.

The selection process comprises three stages:

1. Initial Screening Call (typically 15 mins for external candidates)

The purpose of this call is for the hiring manager to establish the candidate's understanding of the role, confirm and clarify any key areas such as terms and conditions to ensure there is a match with candidate's expectations.

2. First Interviews.

Interviews are typically 50 minutes long plus an assessment where required. Interview questions are competency and values based. The interview panel includes the hiring manager and two others. Diversity is sought in all panel composition to include those with different characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, internal stakeholders and different grades. Clear guidance for diversity of panel composition, chairing the interview panel and meeting prospective employees prior to appointment is provided at each grade level. A 'meet the team' stage is conducted if no second interview is required.

3. Second Interviews

This stage includes the hiring manager and another panellist. For the most senior roles a 'meet the team' stage is compulsory if not already conducted after the first interview.

It is worth noting that our most recent independent study conducted by Worknest in 2023 confirmed the RSA as 'An exemplar employer for staff diversity'.

I hope this provides helpful context that demonstrates our approach to recruitment at all levels is fair and open, led by a clear job description, is competency and values based, and is assessed by a diverse panel.

c) Fellowship Recruitment

Based on feedback from Fellows, we have simplified the application process but not reduced the due diligence. We now ask for a personal statement and details of their work. The same due diligence applies in that all applications are reviewed by the Fellowship Team and subsequently by the Nominations and Governance Panel. We request a reference if we need further verification when reviewing the application. We also investigate if anyone expresses concern about a Fellow, whether new or existing.

As a values-based organisation, we welcome all those who support the RSA vision, share our values and who are passionate about driving social change. We have always been a home for those committed to positive social change regardless of background, qualifications or level of perceived success. We also recognise the need to attract a younger and more diverse Fellowship over time to enable the social mission of the RSA.

The application process is designed to be a more inclusive approach, based on Fellow feedback, enabling younger and more diverse Fellows to apply, who may not yet have the networks to enable two nominations or have had the opportunity to be recognised for their good work. Each applicant is required to sign up to our Fellowship Charter and Code of Conduct and to the values outlined in both.

d) Fellowship Engagement vs Consultation

The RSA Fellowship lies at the core of our initiatives so connecting and engaging more powerfully across our 31,000+ RSA's Fellows is a key priority. We have learned that Fellows have different ways in which they prefer to connect with the RSA and we continue to listen, learn, experiment and develop the most relevant ways for Fellows to do this. Our aim is to make it as easy as possible for Fellows to connect, engage, and contribute, based on their own individual preferences and desired level of engagement with their areas of interest as well as the RSA's Design for Life strategy and interventions.

You expressed a preference for 'engagement' in early incubation of projects to share expertise rather than 'consultation' or input. This kind of input is helpful for us and the Fellowship Team to understand.

We have been engaging with Fellows on a very proactive basis since Andy Haldane joined the RSA as CEO. Over the past year we have engaged with over 8,800 fellows worldwide. When the Design for Life Strategy was being shaped, the team engaged with around 1,000 fellows who provided valuable insights and advice for its further development.

The launch of Circle is just one example of how we are making it easier for Fellows to connect and collaborate online, regardless of geographic location. Feedback from our annual survey and pulse surveys informs the development of our fellowship offerings. We conduct focus groups based on this feedback and continue this year to further involve fellows in key RSA committees such as the Arts Committee, the DEI Hub and the Research and Ethics Advisory Group.

To further enhance fellowship engagement, we are focusing on two key areas this year; Optimising Micro-communities and Empowering Fellow-led activity.

We have also recognised the importance of extending engagement opportunities beyond London and the Fellowship Team is prioritising local engagement initiatives, including RSA Connect, Co-working Spaces and Fellows Festival.

We have strengthened our approach to communications delivery in recent months and new approaches to engaging our Fellowship community have begun in earnest. Over the coming months we will also showcase and celebrate RSA Fellows in new digital campaigns, and we will be highlighting the innovative work of our global Fellowship. This is the beginning of a new approach that will place our talented Fellows at the heart of RSA engagement.

3. Independent and externally benchmarked staff research & insights

Our priority as a Board, which is shared by Andy and the leadership team, is ensuring the wellbeing of our staff and providing them with support they need during what is a dynamic period of change for the organisation.

It is dynamic because we have introduced the new Design for Life strategy, which identifies a new framework and interventions of work. As a board we view this as hugely

positive and it reflects Fellows' feedback, requesting clarity on the strategy for how we will deliver greater impact.

We have also introduced new ways of working to reduce silos, optimise collaboration and alignment across departments.

We have needed to find people that bring different skills and experiences that are a better fit for this new strategic approach. This includes making engaging the Fellowship a key priority, increasing and better integrating our internal and external communication, scaling our impact through partnerships in all sectors including the private sector, seeking ways to increase our international reach – all in service of the RSA achieving greater social impact.

We also continue to bring operational rigour to the organisation and ensure alignment of our people, finance, marketing, communications, business development and IT strategies, introducing new platforms as needed to provide the appropriate level of support required.

As discussed, we are a relatively small organisation (of just over 110 people). As a charity primarily based in central London, there has always been a tendency for people to use the valuable experience gained at the RSA as a strong springboard in pursuit of promotion and to broaden their experience, or to move out of London to more affordable areas. Historically our voluntary attrition rate is typically 20-25%.

It is a fact of organisational life that in times of change, higher attrition is often inevitable as people choose to buy in or otherwise to a new strategy and new ways of working. Voluntary attrition is understandably higher than normal during this period of change. As of 31 January, voluntary attrition is 37%. Our aim is to return to our typical rate (or lower) as soon as possible.

As discussed, while we respect and support the right to unionise and the collective pay bargaining that comes with Trade Union recognition, it is also important to acknowledge that there are inevitable work pressures and disruptions that the IWGB's strike actions are presenting for all staff. The executive team continues to express their gratitude to all staff for their ongoing commitment through this challenging time. They are also acutely aware of the toll the union's actions and on-going campaigning is having on our people.

I note that you stated that you are not directly involved in the ongoing dispute between the Union and the RSA but you have stated that this dispute adds to your concerns. It is therefore important for you to know that the RSA has been actively engaged in pay negotiations for nearly a year, meeting with union representatives 9 times to openly and transparently share details about our financial situation. The RSA management has acted consistently and in good faith throughout, making pay offers that are affordable and sustainable within the tight budgetary constraints that we face. The latest update on collective pay bargaining discussions with the IWGB trade union (of which approximately 30% of our exceptional staff team are members) is regularly updated on the RSA website for transparency.

We also recently independently benchmarked salaries for staff in the bargaining unit and found them to be competitive in the external market.

To enable all staff to provide confidential feedback during this dynamic and challenging period of change, an independent staff survey had been planned for the beginning of 2024 and is currently underway. This is being carried out by Gallup, an independent organisation specialising in organisational behaviour and engagement, and importantly provides the opportunity for external benchmarking. It will also identify any key areas of concern for further investigation that may need to be addressed.

The results of the survey will of course be shared with the People and Remuneration Committee and subsequently the Trustee Board.

We appreciate your concern for our staff and the heightened turnover and hope that our approach demonstrates our commitment to their wellbeing and to addressing any concerns they may raise.

As discussed, as part of our governance, we regularly review all procedures for staff to raise a concern. We can confirm that staff training has been undertaken to ensure all staff are aware and understand how to report any concerns they may have. This includes the Dignity at Work policy which covers bullying and harassment, Grievance Procedure and Whistleblowing Policy. Staff can also raise concerns to an independent, outsourced, 24/7 whistleblowing hotline.

In order to ensure open and transparent communication and support the wellbeing of all staff, there are a wide range of opportunities for staff to directly engage and influence organisational life and decision making. Their feedback and participation is actively encouraged both informally and formally.

As you would expect, we also support their individual performance, development, and growth. We ensure that all of our people understand how their role contributes to our RSA social mission, through a well-defined job description, have clearly agreed objectives as well as a personal development plan to support their continued development.

We have exceptional skills and experience in the current leadership and wider staff teams and their extraordinary dedication to the RSA's work and to supporting the development and capability of their respective teams has never been higher.

Summary

In summary, we trust that this letter accurately reflects the key points of our discussion, the matters you have raised as well as your suggestions, that you kindly took the time to explain in more detail.

We were pleased that you felt you had had the opportunity to share all your feedback with us and that by the end of our meeting, there was nothing else that you wished to share that had not already been raised.

We hope that this letter demonstrates our existing progress and continuing commitment to the following key areas:

1. Continue to expand our open, transparent and deliberate communication with Fellows
2. Openly share our robust processes and criteria related to recruitment
3. Independent and externally benchmarked staff research & insights

At our meeting, we discussed your request for an inquiry into the affairs of the RSA and that the way you have framed the scope of that request in prior correspondence is extremely broad.

During the meeting you elaborated on your request for an inquiry, by saying that your primary focus was in relation to staff. However, you were unable to produce any evidence for us to investigate regarding concerns about staff matters.

You have proposed a scope of 5 years, and to include those who have left the RSA (both staff and Fellows). The Board believes this is inappropriate and impractical, it is also unevicenced in its basis and hugely disproportionate to the matters you have raised.

In the light of the extensive information with which we have been able to provide you, which sets out very clearly the priority given to staff welfare and the routes for staff to raise any concerns they may have, the Board do not believe there is a valid basis or necessity for any inquiry.

In any event, we hope our discussions have illustrated how seriously the Board takes the welfare of our people and their oversight. We regard this as a key part of our duties as Trustees.

The Board, therefore, believe that any request for an inquiry would be inappropriate use of charitable resources (time, money and people), especially during such a period of change, at a time when the RSA is stretched financially, and that our priority should be on supporting the wellbeing of our people.

Please feel free to maintain this open line of communication if there is anything else you wish to share with us and we will always endeavour to provide a timely response as representatives of the Board of Trustees.

With our thanks and best wishes,
Yours sincerely

Charlotte Oades
Deputy Chair, The RSA

Neil Beagrie
Chair RSA Fellowship Council

Copy to: RSA Trustees