

## THE SOCIETY'S FUTURE - DISCUSSION FORUM

In seeking the thoughts of the membership, the Council undertook a survey in late 2011 and, at the 2012 Conference, is hosting a Discussion Forum. Three supporting papers follow this introduction. First, there is a summary of all our survey returns.

The *Bulletin*, the main conferences, and the Newbury meetings are all widely appreciated but the website in particular needs urgent attention. Also, we very much need new volunteers.

The supporting papers incorporate a number of suggestions and I look forward to your collective consideration of these at the discussion forum.

*Frank King*

**Background:** At the July 2011 Council meeting the Chairman proposed, and Council unanimously endorsed, that the membership be surveyed. The survey was sent out with the September 2011 *Bulletin*. This paper outlines the survey's main findings. It is being circulated in

- March to Council to assist its deliberations;
- April to Cheltenham conference delegates as input to the discussion forum on the
- Society's future and direction; and
- June with the *Bulletin* as information to all members.

Response: 64 returns were received by the Secretary to the end of January. This paper's results are thus based on 16% - about 1 in 6 - of the membership. They thus represent a most informed and systematic insight into members views - the first in recent times.

Age structure: The median age of respondents is 73 years. More specifically about

- 1 in 5 members are over 80;
- 2 in 5 members are in their 70s;
- 1 in 3 members are in their 60s; but only
- 1 in 10 members are in their 40s or 50s.

Such a back end loaded age structure presents a considerable recruitment challenge if the Society's current membership of 400 is to be sustained.

**A new direction for the Society?** This was the survey's most open ended question. 1 in 5 positively declared a new direction was necessary. Common/key words used include

- broaden appeal, more outward looking, modernise;
- recruit more young members;
- more events and activities, especially the educative; and
- a website supportive to, and reflective of, the above.

Interestingly, and tellingly, the desire for change is greater amongst younger members - our recruitment ground! 2 in 5 of those in their 40s & 50s and 1 in 4 of those in their 60s saw a need for change.

**The *Bulletin*:** This question solicited a very high response - only 1 in 10 failed to answer.

Opinion is unambiguously laudatory

2 in 3 rate the *Bulletin* highly, half of whom judge it to be excellent or superb; with the rest satisfied - any criticism (on the fingers of a single hand) is in the context of overall satisfaction. The membership's views on the *Bulletin* provide a benchmark the Society should aspire to in all areas.

**Programme of events:** The responses to this question tended to focus on the existence of events rather than judgement thereon. In particular

- universal support was expressed for the continuance of the annual conference and
- Newbury; virtually no mention was made of competitions (photographic and trails) - such as there was suggested less; where comment was made on the annual conference and Newbury it was overwhelmingly
- complementary to both; and
- 1 in 6 wishes to see additional events.

Suggested additional events coalesce around the smaller, local 'one-off' - rather than the regular annual set piece - and comprise museum visits, local safaris, practical workshops and Newbury style meetings. (It is interesting to note that the word counts for 'Newbury' and 'conference' in the survey responses are similar).

**Management:** Opinion is split down the middle with a little over half rating it as satisfactory or better; and under half being silent or critical.

Comfort should not be sought in the fact the silent outweigh the critical by 3 to 1. Silence (almost always) reflects suppressed criticism not praise - cf *Bulletin* comment. Critical comment is an interesting mix of that looking to the

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past - no idea, seems to tick along, seems remote; and future - clearly moving to modern times, the survey a good start, very well run currently.

**Communication:** Opinion is again split down the middle with

- one half rating it satisfactory or better; and
- the other half being silent or critical.

The critical slightly outweigh the silent. Critical comment is an interesting mix of that looking to the past - not enough, top down, needs lighter touch; and

- future - it is improving, big mistakes now corrected.

**Website:** Only 1 in 3 rate it as satisfactory or better. This is an overestimate because of anomalous results for respondents aged over eighty. Despite their lower internet access (75% versus 94%) they return the most positive rating. Suspicion is confirmed by their zero electronic survey response (compared with 45%). A more realistic assessment excludes those over eighty.

On this basis

only 1 in 4 rate the website as satisfactory or better; whilst 3 in 4 are silent or critical.

The critical slightly outweigh the silent. Critical comment clusters around

- needs redesign and reconstruction;
- needs updating; and
- don't bother to use it.

When digesting the implications of these results sight must not be lost of the fact that the state of our website is a collective responsibility. Its content is no more the 'fault' of the Webmaster than the weather is that of the weather forecaster.

**How to attract new members?** 2 out of 3 answered. The suggestions divide into four broad types of similar frequency

- improved website;
- target schools/colleges/universities;
- target related (national and local) societies via advertising/publicity and lectures; and
- other advertising/publicity of a general or unspecified nature.

We are, of course, resource constrained - particularly in the extent of face to face based publicity. Given the number of related societies and educational institutions our leverage and penetration through traditional means is severely limited. In reality the only practical and cost effective method of reaching the perceived target opportunities for new members on any significant scale is via the internet and our website.

**New help:** Prospective new volunteers were limited to a couple of specific offers; and a handful of offers of unspecified/ad hoc help.

Our requirements are determined by the progressive retirement of a long serving cohort of stalwarts and the wishes expressed in this survey's responses for change, improvement and additional events. Welcome as the survey responses' initial offers are, if we are to meet the challenges we face, they will need to be built upon.

**2014:** The question on how we might celebrate and mark the Society's silver anniversary brought forth a wide range of ideas with many suggesting more than a single proposal. Many regarded 2014 as a special opportunity to generate publicity. The top four proposals were

- a 'special' conference and dinner (1 in 4); .
- commission memorial dial(s) (1 in 5);
- a publication of some sort (1 in 10); and
- an exhibition or tour (1 in 10).

1 in 4 saw fit not to answer the question - the balance of indifference versus disapproval therein is unknown. (Interestingly 1 in 20 of those answering specifically stated there should be no special celebration).

**Conclusion:** The survey authoritatively reveals - for the first time in a long time - the real views of the membership. Although the Society's traditional core programme - *Bulletin*, conference and Newbury - is well regarded there is a widespread call for change and improvement especially amongst the younger half of the membership. This is particularly striking in regard to our website - increasingly critical to everything (actual and aspirational) we do.

Having willed the ends, the membership must in turn will the means - new blood volunteers!

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## Appendix

### The questionnaire

#### Membership Survey – Sept 2011

Dear fellow member,

If together we are to take the Society successfully into the future it is essential I fully understand your opinions and aspirations. Might I therefore invite you to spare the time to complete this questionnaire?

Many questions are simple factual ones: Some seek comment, and I hope you will feel able to respond to them honestly and completely. Should you feel more comfortable doing so anonymously that is fine. In any case returns will be held in confidence by the Secretary and destroyed after their collective results have been fed back to the membership.

One of our great strengths as a Society is that we are run on an entirely voluntary basis. It is also one of our biggest on-going challenges! Retirements need to be replaced. But we need to do so more flexibly and imaginatively than hitherto, 'back-filling' in advance by introducing new blood to assist and help within a team structure, not to assume immediate responsibility. In that spirit some questions are posed which I hope will receive a positive response.

May I thank you in advance for your co-operation?

Yours,

Frank King  
Chairman

#### **A. Personal Details**

Name (Optional)

How long have you been a member of the Society?

Where do you live?

Age

What is (or, if retired, what was) your principle occupation and your specialist skills/qualifications?

What other societies are you a member of?

Do you have regular access to the internet?

What are the benefits you derive from membership of the Society?

#### **B. Use of the Society**

How many of the last five spring conferences have you attended?

How many of the last five Newbury meetings have you attended?

How many of our organised overseas trips have you attended in the last five years?

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Have you ever participated in one of our photograph competitions?

How often do you use the website?

### **C. Improvement and Change**

Is there a new direction or emphasis that you would like to see the Society take?

What change would you most like to see?

Please comment on each of the following including improvements you would like to see:-

The Bulletin.

The Newsletter.

The Website.

The programme of events (noting any that might be introduced or discontinued).

The Society's communication with its membership.

The design, management and use of the fixed dial and mass dial registers.

The management and running of the Society.

## **D. Participation**

How can we attract new members?

How can we be more attractive to existing members?

What Society activities, including its management, would you be willing to help with?

What would be your preferred form of help?

How would you like the Society to celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014?

Please comment below on any other matter you consider appropriate.