

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT, AGM 2018

Ladies and gentlemen, Good afternoon

I want to start by thanking our Team - for more than 25 years our organisation has benefited from the expertise and passion of a small staff: at this point, we have 15 staff and 6 House volunteers: a group of people who are often referred to as Headquarters, NADFAS House, number 8, The Arts Society House. They are an incredible team and deserve to be acknowledged and thanked sincerely for all the professional and dedicated work they do: Thank you.

I want to thank all those who work with our Team: the Training team, the New Societies Team, the Society Support Team, the national teams of volunteering, the committee members, and all those who come to The Arts Society House, and those who invite us to join them. The Arts Society House is a real hub of activity, used by thousands of people every year, and I really do hope that anyone who connects with us at 8 Guilford Street feels that they are part of a community.

A few weeks ago, on my way to work, I cycled past a site near King's Cross which looked like this. And, perhaps bizarrely, it reminded me of The Arts Society. Not just because there are, indeed, many things under construction; but because of what this represents.

This is the construction site for a new Power Network substation. It is a substation that will, and I quote from the planning application 'relieve loading issues in the surrounding network and provide spare 11kV circuit breakers'. Exciting stuff!

It goes on 'These spare breakers give spare flexibility to the surrounding network and also allow timely connection of new HV customers'. Of course the residents and workers in the surrounding area of Kings Cross, including our offices, currently enjoy the use of electricity on a daily basis; we take it for granted that we have uninterrupted power services, and we expect this to be unchanged. When this new substation will come online, there is no doubt that - apart from perhaps a few hours of potential disruption - service will resume as normal.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is very much what our work over the past 2 years or so has been about. It echoes many of our services; many of which simply run in the background and are - rightly - taken for granted; it is what we do.

We provide resources, training, the directory, administrative, insurance and legal support; we publish the magazine, and so on. Much of what we do is invisible, and yet crucial to the ongoing operation.

What the new substation will do is 'give spare flexibility and allow for timely connection with new customers'; so this is a matter of scalability and growth; and not necessarily of

change or improvement - after all electricity is electricity; it is simply creating more capacity in a changing environment.

The new substation will also do something else though: it will address key risks before they become a problem: it will prevent poor performance of the system in the future, it will prevent system overload; it will get the network ahead of the curve to be ready for new railway lines; it will prevent unnecessary maintenance costs of an antiquated grid structure - it will prevent future failures. It recognises the need for future-proofing and upgrading a network

So, we need to ask ourselves, are we prepared for the future and how can *we* create spare flexibility and a timely connection with new customers? And more importantly, what have we been doing to future-proof?

Before I answer this question, I'd like to look back, briefly, at the history of change in The Arts Society.

It is always tempting to look back and consider the past through a lens of nostalgia. However, we have many amongst us who can attest to the fact that the good old days were just as turbulent, controversial and challenging as the present day. Ask any of the past National Chairmen present today; each one faced, together with their executive and council, their own trials and challenges: many of you will remember the fear with which digital projection was introduced the introduction of a quarterly magazine; the perennial tensions between the autonomous groups and the central body. Patricia Fay said this when she foresaw that there would be such challenges: I quote: 'I am much aware of the many administrative problems as N.A.D.F.A.S grows, and even greater, the problems of communication with our Member Societies'.

I think as we celebrate the achievements of the past, we must include – and recognise - , the controversies, the arguments, the voices of dissent; they have challenged the organisation, led us to reflect and review; sometimes to turn around when we went wrong. So I also want to thank all those who have disagreed, challenged, and expressed their dissatisfaction. This is your anniversary, too.

Chief Executive of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, said recently 'People make mistakes and learn along the way. [...] What people should hold us accountable for is learning from the mistakes'.

Look at the biggest brand on the planet, Apple, and how many mistakes Steve Jobs made before he changed the world of design and technology in ways we just could not have foreseen at the beginning of this century.

There is no doubt that over the last 50 years there have been decisions, developments, and changes not everyone agreed with in their local Society, in their Area, or nationally. As an

organisation of 90,000 members we must accept that we cannot always be in agreement; and also that a culture of critical exchange is far better than one of apathy and disengagement. So let us celebrate 50 years of constant improvement through healthy, constructive and informed exchange of ideas and views between the different parts of the organisation.

How can a look at the past of Apple and, more importantly, The Arts Society, help us build an infrastructure for the future, and what are the steps we've taken?

First, we will continue to listen and exchange views - it is healthy, even if there isn't always consensus: what may not be apparent to a lot of people, though, is just how much we listen to Societies and Members. We draw on their views, opinions, ambitions and talents all the time, ensuring that our direction of travel is underpinned with solid data and information, both from within, and outside the organisation. Our structure and activities create an ongoing and meaningful exchange of views and expertise. Every year we hold 39 area meetings; hundreds of training sessions; create feedback opportunities, surveys and questionnaires; we consult on strategic issues; recently ran nationwide SWOT analyses; we carry out research. All of the decisions that we make are the result of careful and thorough interrogation of the key issues we need to address.

Second: we must not be afraid of making mistakes and develop as we go along: whether one agrees with this or not, most modern service structures are about agile processes where you improve continuously and focus less on getting it right the first time: you may remember the iPhone 4 which you had to hold with three fingers to make a call! What did Apple do? They fixed it. Has it damaged their stock value - well, no....

We need to learn from this and accept that in the world of consumer services and products and in particular in the world of digital, there is no end point of development: you've got to keep moving and change your services around people and what they expect. When we launch something new, like the magazine or the website, there will be problems and errors. A major study of membership organisations has shown that the top 10 challenges include familiar themes such as

- Improving the membership database
- Developing the website
- Raising profile and awareness

There is a risk that we focus too much on tilting at windmills: If every membership organisation has to deal with these issues, are we really creating value by focusing so much on them. This is not to say that we should ignore these challenges, but perhaps we should take a more pragmatic view of where we can - and should - achieve real value.

Third: Things will change - there is no point denying progress and change, you have to go with it - imagine if we would still use these! - had we listened to a lot of people about 10 years ago we'd now be the only organisation in the country still using these.

Fourth, people change - you have to change with them! Just as local Societies make changes to ensure their Members value and enjoy the experience, we also have to do this centrally. Our members are much more digitally engaged, so we offer a digital newsletter now; our members are much more interested in broader arts and culture, so we create a magazine that reflects their wishes. Our Members want us to have a view on the future of the arts and widen access to the arts; so this is what we will be fighting for. Whilst we do not engage with Members on a monthly basis like our Societies, we nevertheless can gauge their needs from our research, focus groups, and ongoing feedback.

So what are the infrastructure projects that we have been working on over the last year that, like the substation, will create future capacity:

- Launched and applied branding that is designed around us but also welcoming for new members;
- We have relaunched the magazine to become both a Membership benefit as well as a powerful marketing tool to attract new audiences;
- we have also developed an entirely new publishing strategy which is aimed at new membership recruitment; for this we have launched an electronic newsletter and are preparing a content hub for digital users whose first experience of us will not be a lecture, our homepage or a cultural outing, but content pages about the arts
- We have created a wide range of resources for Societies and Areas to create a more coherent and consistent look and feel; some of this is more traditional, some more out there to appeal to new audiences that have started to come to our events
- We have created a scalable website that can be used both centrally and locally, with hundreds of Societies uploading their content to theartsociety.org. This site will continue to be expanded, it will grow, be improved on, changed, redeveloped
- We have expanded our training programmes and offer much more training at regional level
- We have started and are continuing initiatives that introduce The Arts Society to new audiences, including the jazz exhibition which reached more than 40,000 people
- We create more and more opportunities for new lecturers across all the arts so that we can offer a contemporary, exciting and vibrant directory that appeals to the widest possible audience. We also work in partnership with our incredible lecturers and create programmes that showcase the arts and culture in a way only we can.
- We are working closely with our volunteering arms to promote this as something that our Members can enjoy and that is a contribution to our charitable objectives.
- We are working on creating awareness and PR-able activities that disseminate our name: I know this is a key expectation for many after the rebranding, and we are giving this due priority- to that end we will launch, later this year, a major new arts prize worth £25k per annum which will be part of a wider media strategy that will see

us reposition ourselves publicly as an organisation with a voice and purpose to invest in the arts: with no impact on the affiliation fee

- Finally, we are focusing our energy and efforts into SUPPORTING Societies and harnessing skills to create even more facilities to advise Societies on how to tackle local issues. We are about to launch a new support team of volunteers and change how we assist Societies through staff and volunteers working together even more closely.

So, like our substation in King's Cross, we are preparing for the future of the organisation by increasing capacity, scalability and additional services that contribute to the membership experience. We are aware that not every initiative is necessarily always of immediate value or aid locally or regionally, and much of what we do is not instantly visible in a way that some of you would like to see. Infrastructure projects take time and are as much about planning as they are about delivery. I would like to reassure you though, that all the work we do is grounded in and aimed at supporting you and the arts through a modern, reliable and future-proof infrastructure that enables all of us to offer a fantastic membership experience - now and in the coming 50 years.

Thank you.

Florian Schweizer, Chief Executive
May 2018