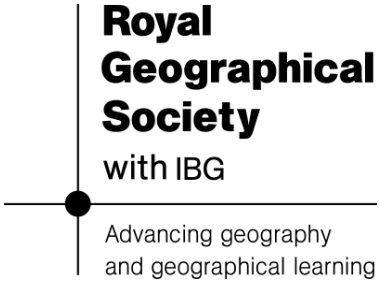

Strategies for Learned Societies in the Humanities and Social Sciences

A Report for the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council

Dr Rita Gardner and Dr Michael Jubb

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Executive Summary

This report is one of two main outputs of a project commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council to assess the extent to which learned societies in the arts, humanities and social sciences currently engage in strategic planning; and, more importantly, to provide support for them as they seek to develop strategies to sustain and enhance the services they provide to support and promote the disciplines and communities they represent.

The report focuses on the first part of our work: how we built up a picture of the different types of learned societies in relevant disciplines and subjects; the different approaches they adopt to planning their activities and services; and risks to the sustainability of those services.

We found that only relatively small proportion of the two hundred societies in the humanities and social sciences - most but not all to be found among the larger societies - currently have a formal strategic plan. We have identified from them a rich range of experience in developing their strategies and the key issues they have sought to address; how they have implemented their strategies and monitored progress; the benefits they believe to have resulted; the lessons they have learned; and the changes and innovations they have introduced.

But most societies - particularly the smaller and medium-sized ones - have not developed plans, even though some of them think that they would benefit from doing so. We assess the barriers they face, not least the limited resources in time, experience and expertise to devote to exercises of this kind. Nevertheless, we believe that the findings summarised in this report may help some societies to identify the benefits they could achieve through strategic planning. One of our key messages is that there is no single template for strategies and the processes through which they are generated, and that both must be fitted to the circumstances of individual societies. But we believe that effective strategies could help societies to enhance the services they provide to the subjects and disciplines, and the scholarly communities they seek to support and promote.

Perhaps the more important of our outputs, therefore is the guidance and toolkit that we have created in order to help societies of different types and sizes to realise the benefits they could achieve through strategic planning. That guidance is being made accessible via the Royal Geographical Society's website, where it will be maintained over at least the next three years. .

Our starting point was a profound belief that learned societies in the humanities and social sciences perform a critical role in the ecology of research and scholarship in the UK. We hope that this report, and even more the guidance associated with it, will help to sustain and enhance that role for the future.

1. Introduction

Learned societies perform a critical role in the ecology of research and scholarship in the UK. Most of them are charities, and thus have charitable objects built into their constitutions. But in the current rapidly-changing scholarly and research environment, they face critical challenges as they seek to sustain and develop the range and scope of their activities and services; and to define and exploit their niches within and beyond the academy.

Societies must therefore seek appropriate responses to significant external changes that present risks (but also potential opportunities) for them and the services they provide in support of the discipline and the academy. Such challenges come in many different and interconnected forms, including changing policy frameworks, changes in increasingly-constrained funding frameworks, changing membership profiles, technology shifts, and from other service providers (including other societies).

Research funders' moves to accelerate the transition to open access (OA) is one such challenge for many societies. Many societies that derive significant proportions of their income from publishing see this as a primary current challenge. Scholarly publications form an important part of societies' services for their discipline and their scholarly communities; for the surpluses they derive from publishing are a very significant source of funds they use to support other activities. Hence many societies see a threat to the whole range of their activities and services, even if for the most art they do not see the threat as imminent.

But the OA challenge is set in a wider context of change affecting the disciplines and subjects, as well as the scholarly and other communities that learned societies seek to promote and serve. Relevant changes may include technological and related developments in the knowledge economy; changes in the demographic profile, and in the scholarly interests and practices, of the research community; changes in both policy and practice in education at both schools and university levels; and changes in research policy and funding.

2. Aims and objectives

In the context set out above, our aim in this study has been

- to provide support for learned societies as they seek to consider, develop and implement strategies to sustain and enhance their activities and services to support, promote and advance the disciplines and communities they represent.

In order to fulfil that aim, we have

- built up a picture of the range of learned societies in the humanities and social sciences in the UK, their activities, finances, and modes of operation.
- examined their current approaches – as well as barriers - to the development of strategies and plans; and assessed potential risks to their activities and services, as well as opportunities to respond and adapt to changing circumstances.
- created new resources, relevant to societies of different kinds, to stimulate thinking and help guide their approaches to strategic thinking and planning, and the implementation of their strategies and plans

3. Overview of our findings

A relatively small proportion of societies in the humanities and social sciences - most but not all to be found among the larger societies - currently have in place a formal written strategy or strategic plan. From among those societies we have identified a rich range of experience and expertise relating to the processes through which the they have developed their strategies and the key issues and questions they have sought to address; how they have implemented their strategies and monitored progress; the benefits they believe to have accrued to them as a result of these processes; the lessons they have learned; and the changes and innovations they have introduced as a consequence of their current strategies.

But most societies- concentrated among the smaller and medium-sized ones - have not engaged in a recent strategy exercise, even though some of them think that they would benefit from doing so. We recognise the barriers they face, not least their dependence on voluntary effort, and the limited resources in time, experience and expertise to devote to exercises of this kind. Nevertheless, we believe that the findings summarised in this report, and the guidance and advice associated with it, may help some societies to realise the benefits they could achieve as a result of strategic planning. The resources required to develop an effective strategy may not be as large as some societies fear. One of our key messages is that there is no single template for strategies and the processes through which they are generated, and that both must be fitted to the circumstances of individual societies. But we believe that effective strategies could help societies to enhance the services they provide to the subjects and disciplines, and the scholarly communities they seek to support and promote. Such benefits could be of great value to the humanities and social sciences in the UK. That is the motivation underlying this report.

4. Methodology

Our project has been guided by a Steering Group chaired by Professor Philip Ogden and with representatives of learned societies and also a specialist in strategic planning. Our work has involved desk research, focus groups and interviews, and a survey, in five main stages.

First, in order to generate an initial picture of the range of learned societies in the humanities and social sciences, we sought to identify as comprehensive a list as possible of such bodies. Our aim here was to build an understanding of the multi-faceted circumstances of different societies, their experiences, capacities and capabilities in relation to strategy and planning. Since there is no clear definition of learned societies or their characteristics, we adopted an inclusive approach in searching for relevant bodies across a wide range of sources - including listings from the British Academy, the Academy of Social Sciences, the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers, and HM Revenue and Customs. Nevertheless, we are aware that our list of nearly200 such bodies includes no more than a small number of the – typically very small - societies that seek to promote and celebrate the works of individual authors, artists and composers. On the other hand, we have included a small number of societies that may span the distinction between learned societies and professional associations. And we have identified separately a similarly small number of research institutes or groups that appear to fulfil a significant support role for their subject area or discipline; and a group of societies, schools and institutes that currently receive significant funding from the British Academy to provide support for UK scholarship overseas, particularly in archaeology. A full list of the societies and related organisations we have identified is provided at Annex A.

Second, we built up through desk research a picture of the activities of such societies, from their websites and, where possible, from annual reports and accounts submitted to the Charity Commission. From these sources we were able to identify some key characteristics of societies in relation to their

- disciplinary or subject focus
- charitable objects

- numbers and characteristics of members
- employment of paid staff
- range of activities, including publishing
- income and expenditure
- evidence of planning activities

We also drew on recent reports including the *Evaluation of Learned Societies in the Social Sciences Project* commissioned by the Academy of Social Sciences and published in May 2014; and *Understanding the impact of open access on arts, humanities and social sciences journal publishing,* produced by the British Academy. But we believe that the picture we have developed is fuller and richer than any that has been generated in the past. It also enabled us to select societies with a wide range of different characteristics with which to engage during subsequent stages of the project.

Third, we sought input from societies themselves in order to identify and assess their current approaches to the development of strategies and plans; any barriers they face that militate against effective strategic thinking and planning; and their approaches to potential risks to their activities and services, as well as opportunities to respond and adapt to changing circumstances. After circulating information about the project to societies via the British Academy and the Academy of Social Sciences, we consulted with them in three ways

- First, we held an initial focus group with representatives of six societies – ranging widely in size and subject/disciplinary coverage - to explore their experiences of strategic planning and implementation, the drivers for and the barriers against such activities, the opportunities and challenges they face, and their plans for the future. This helped us to develop the questionnaire and the interview schedule used in the following stages of our consultation.
- Second, we circulated the questionnaire to the 197 societies on our core list, and received responses from 60 of them: a pleasingly-high response rate for such a survey. We checked the responses against key characteristics of societies from our full list - discipline/subject, size, scope of activities, levels of income and expenditure, employment of staff – and we are satisfied that the responses are a reasonably representative sample of the whole set of societies. The responses have provided us with a rich resource of information about the societies, their experiences of and views about strategic planning.
- Third, we have held lengthy interviews with representatives of a sample eleven societies to explore in greater depth their experiences of and attitudes towards strategic thinking and planning (whether they have engaged in formal planning exercises or not), and the kinds of guidance or support that they might find useful in the future. The interviews have been supplemented by further documentary research relating to these societies, their activities and strategies. We have thus established a rich source of information about these eleven societies, which has enabled us to develop a deep understanding of how they operate, the challenges they face, how and why they have set about strategic planning (or not), the lessons they have learned and the benefits they have achieved.

Fourth, we have analysed the data and information from the documentary research, the survey, the interviews and focus group to develop an analytical picture of

- the pattern of learned societies in the humanities and social sciences in the UK;
- their activities and the services they provide to promote and support their disciplines or subject areas, their scholarly communities, and other interested stakeholders;

- their approaches to strategy and planning, or its absence, and the lessons they have learned.

It is perhaps not surprising that the picture is characterised as much by differences as by commonalities. Learned societies are for the most part not very much like other kinds of organisations in the voluntary or public (still less the commercial) sectors; but each of them also has its own peculiar sets of characteristics. It follows that guidance to societies on possible approaches to strategic thinking and planning must take account of these differences; societies are very much a group where one size does not fit all. Hence we have developed a typology that we hope will help individual societies to locate themselves among the broader group of societies as a whole.

The fifth stage of our work has therefore been to develop - and to test with societies - resources and materials that may help them in

- identifying the need for and the value of developing a strategy
- different approaches to strategic thinking and planning,
- how to involve and engage multiple groups in the processes leading to the development of a strategy
- implementing a new strategy and the development of operating, financial and business plans
- monitoring progress and sustaining momentum
- evaluating success.

5. Key findings

5.1. The landscape of societies in the arts, humanities and social sciences

Disciplinary/subject coverage

Of the 197 societies on our core list, roughly two thirds may be characterised as covering arts and humanities subjects and disciplines, with the remaining third in the social sciences. We are aware, of course, that the distinction is not always clear-cut for societies covering subjects or disciplines such as area studies or legal studies. In broad terms, the humanities appear to be characterised by a larger number of small societies covering sub-disciplines and subject areas: the Ecclesiastical History Society, the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies, and the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology, for example, sitting alongside larger societies covering the major disciplines such as history and archaeology. In the social sciences, on the other hand, the societies covering the major disciplines, such as sociology, economics, geography, and politics appear to be stronger, and there are *relatively* fewer sub-disciplinary societies.

Publishing activities

As with learned societies, there is no clear-cut definition of a scholarly journal; but a reasonable estimate would be that more than 80% (160) of the core group of 197 societies and associations we have identified publish one or more such journals. Most of them publish a single journal, but the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy publishes nine, the Association for South East Asian Studies eight, and the English Association seven; and several societies, including the Political Studies Association, the Regional Studies Association, and the Social Policy Association publish four or five. Altogether, the 197 societies on our core list publish a total of 229 journals; and a further 20 are published by the other independent and British Academy-sponsored institutes and societies we have identified.

Many societies also publish magazines and newsletters that may include substantial scholarly articles, as well as material of more general interest. Many societies, including the Housing Studies Association, the Social Policy Association, , and the British Institute of International and Comparative Law, also publish substantial reports on matters of interest or concern in their subject or discipline; while other societies, including the Scottish History Society and the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies, also publish substantial series of monographs. These are in addition to the record societies and others such as the Selden Society and the Hakluyt Society whose main raison d'etre is to publish scholarly editions of original sources.

Membership

The key determinant of each society's scale of membership, of course, is the size of the scholarly and other communities – professional practitioners, school teachers, non-affiliated researchers, and people with a general interest in the subject or discipline - that each seeks to serve. Societies thus range hugely in size, from membership in the low hundreds for many sub-disciplinary or specialist societies – such as the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies or the Society for Caribbean Studies - to 11,000 for the Royal Photographic Society, and 25,000 for the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries. Among the core major disciplinary societies in the humanities and social sciences, membership is typically in the range 3,000 to 6,000. A number of societies, both large and small, told us that a key aim was to increase the size of their membership, from the academic community and/or beyond.

Finances

We were able to find financial information relating to 146 (75%) of the societies on our core list. For those societies, incoming resources in the most recent year for which we could obtain figures totalled £90m, or £46m if we exclude the outliers represented by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI, £6.5m), the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, £8m), and the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries (IFA, £30m)) . Alongside those three organisations (which have the characteristics of professional bodies as much as learned societies) a further 12 societies enjoy income of over £1m a year. Six – the Royal Geographical Society, the Geographical Association, the Royal Statistical Society, the Royal Economic Society, the British Sociological Association, and the British Institute of International and Comparative Law – may be characterised as in the social sciences. Four – the English Folk Dance and Song Society, the Royal Photographic Society, the Society of Dyers and Colourists, and the Institute of Conservation – may be characterised as in the practice-based arts. The remaining two – the Council for British Archaeology and the Society of Antiquaries – are in the humanities. Together, these twelve societies account (excluding the RTPI, the BACP and the IFA) for just under half (48%) of the income of all societies.

A further sixteen societies, ranging across all subject areas and including the British Educational Research Association, the Political Studies Association, the Royal African Society, the Society of Archivists, and the Historical Association, have incomes of between £500,000 and £1m. Together these societies account for just under a quarter (24%) of the income of all societies.

There follows a group, again crossing all subject areas, of 33 societies with an income between £100,000 and £500,000. These include societies covering major disciplines, such as the Royal Historical Society, the Classical Association, the Association of Art Historians, the Royal Institute of Philosophy, and the Society of Legal Scholars. Others cover sub-disciplines such as the Economic History Society, the UK Environmental Law Association, and the Social Policy Association; or areas of study, such as the Royal Asiatic Society, or the Universities Association for Contemporary European Studies; or more specialist subjects and areas such as the Bibliographic Society, the William Morris Society, the Furniture History Society, and the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society. Together these societies account for a fifth (20%) of the income of all societies.

The remaining 82 societies for which we were able to gather financial information (thus, 56% of the total) had an income of less than £100,000 in the latest financial year. Together they account for 7% of the income of all societies. The key point that arises from this analysis is that levels of income across the 197 societies is not normally distributed, but positively skewed in favour of a small number of large societies; and these are mainly located in the social sciences and to a lesser extent in archaeology and the practice-based arts.

Staffing

Most societies relay entirely on the voluntary efforts of their officers and members: it is rare for smaller societies (those with an income of £100,000 a year or less) to employ staff, and fewer than half of the societies that responded to our survey indicated that they did so. Among those of our 197 societies for which we have full information, we identified 34 that employ one or more members of staff. But again, the distribution is highly skewed (even excluding the RTPI, BACP and IFA), with eight large societies including the Royal Geographical Society, the Society of Antiquaries, the British Sociological Association and the Royal Statistical Society accounting for over 80% of all staffing. This skewed distribution is confirmed by the respondents to our survey. And outside this group of large societies, only a small number employ a Director or Chief Executive. The rest employ small numbers – typically one or two - of essentially administrative or secretarial staff.

Governance

Most societies are governed by a Council or Board, with honorary officers including President or Chair, Treasurer, secretary and so on elected or appointed at an Annual General Meeting. The medium-sized and larger societies tend also to have further honorary officers (variously titled as Vice Presidents, Secretaries or similar) with responsibilities for specific aspects of the society's work, such as publications, grant programmes, external relations, membership and so on.

Governing bodies tend to be quite large, even among the smaller societies. More than three-quarters of the respondents to our survey indicated that their governing body had either 10-15 or more than 15 members. The size and make-up of governing bodies, and arrangement for the elections to them, are clearly important in any kind of society or association that seeks to support and promote the interests of their disciplines and scholarly communities. But a number of the societies we interviewed made clear that smaller groups of honorary officers, working with senior staff , had been established to play a crucial role in the overall leadership and direction of the society.

It is also clear that the lengths of the period of office of the President or Chair of a society can have an important influence on whether or not a society is able to engage in effective strategic planning. Swift turnover of the senior officer may act as a barrier, since there is too little time during a single period of office to launch, complete and implement an effective plan, which may in itself require some modification to governance structures. Some societies have decided, as a key result of a strategic planning exercise, on a complete remodelling of their governance, to create new structures with office-holders whose responsibilities are directly linked to new sets of strategic goals.

5.2. Strategy and planning

Evidence of strategy and planning

The most visible evidence of a society's strategy is when a strategic or development plan is readily accessible on the society's website. With a search strategy such as that which might be adopted by a reasonably competent searcher – including use of search facilities on society websites themselves (where available), and investigation of tabs such as 'About' - we found such plans on the sites of twenty societies (10% of the total).

It is not surprising that the visible plans are concentrated among the larger societies such as the Royal Geographical Society and the Institute for Conservation. It is also important to stress, however, that some smaller and medium sized societies such as the Oral History Society, the Philological Society, and the Association of Art Historians also have plans which are accessible on their websites. We also recognise, of course, that some societies which we know to have strategic plans – such as the British Sociological Association, and the Society of Dyers and Colourists, - may make them accessible on parts of their website that are visible only to members rather than to the general public; and that yet more societies may have strategies and plans which are not accessible on their websites at all. Altogether, eighteen (30%) of the societies that responded to our survey indicate that they have a current written strategic plan. It follows that the majority of the respondents do not have such a plan, and that they have to date lacked either the capacity or the necessary interest to develop one.

Of those eighteen, three – the British Educational Research Association, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and the David Hume Institute – indicated that it is their first plan. The periods covered by the plans are evenly split between those that last for three, four and five years. There is a close connection between the employment of staff and the existence of a current strategic plan: all of the respondents with plans also employ staff. On the other hand, ten responding societies with no current plan nevertheless employ staff.

Experience and expertise in planning

It is noticeable that the availability of experience and expertise in strategy and planning is no guarantee that a strategy or plan will be developed. Many societies have academics on their governing body who have experience of strategic planning at senior level within their employing institutions – as

Deans, Heads of Faculty, ProViceChancellors and Vice Chancellors –; and many also have trustees with similar experience in other public, voluntary and commercial organisations. Similarly, some larger societies are now drawing their directors of chief executives from a range of such organisations. Only 22 (36%) of responding societies indicated that they had no member of the governing body or senior member of staff with relevant experience, with a slight preponderance of that experience found among members of the governing body rather than senior staff. On the other hand, four of the societies who have a strategic plan in place stated that they had no-one with relevant experience or expertise, presumably because those who had been involved in the most recent exercise had since left the staff or the governing body.

5.3. Societies with written strategies

Triggers for strategic planning

The triggers for initiating a strategy exercise are various. For those societies where such exercises have taken place before, of course, it may often be simply the expiry of an existing plan, although in one case it was because the existing plan was not working effectively. But other factors came into play for a number of societies in relation both to their current and/or previous plans, including a crisis or a realisation that important issues, such as staff capacity or financial pressures, needed to be addressed; or a desire from members and others for a shift of focus in activities or direction. In a significant number of cases, the key trigger was the election of a new President or new members of the governing body, or the appointment of a new director or senior member of staff.

Processes

In terms of process, for those societies which employ a director or chief executive, the process was almost invariably led in partnership between that senior member of staff and the President or Chair. Where such a senior member of staff with the relevant experience or expertise was not in place, the President or Chair typically led the establishment of a sub-committee or working group to lead the process. The process itself was often kicked off by a special meeting of the governing body or an awayday for trustees and (where appropriate) senior staff. But evidence from our survey and our case study societies suggests that the length of the whole process may vary considerably. Larger societies indicated that the process could take up to a year and should not be rushed; whereas some small societies in particular stressed the need for realism about what could be achieved within the time and other resources available, and therefore not to take too much time over the exercise.

Consultation and engagement with members and stakeholders

Only one society used the services of an external expert or a facilitator in the course of their most recent strategy exercise, though several of our case study societies, along with a few of the respondents to our survey, suggested that they might wish to have some external input into strategy and planning for the future. But we found little or no evidence of systematic attempts to consult with or engage external stakeholders in the processes of strategy exercises.

A significant minority of the societies responding to our survey indicated that there was little or no involvement from or consultation with the membership of the society as a whole during the course of their most recent strategy exercise. Nine societies thus indicated that the membership was not directly involved at all. But most societies sought input from the membership either at the beginning of the process, or once initial thoughts had been formulated, or at the end of the process, with most of the input invited at the first two of those stages. The mechanisms used for such input ranged from open invitations to submit suggestions (both from individual members and from special interest groups and committees), questionnaire surveys, focus groups, and the establishment of special working groups.

But those societies that have recently developed strategies stressed the importance for the future of wide consultation with members, staff, and all trustees, and therefore discussions with key committees

or special interest groups. They almost invariably say that in the future they will seek further consultation and engagement as a key part of the process.

> '*the membership must be brought closer into the process of constructing the strategy'*
>
> *'involve as many people and stakeholders as possible from the beginning[and] ensure staff have real engagement with the process'*

There was also a widespread recognition that consultation cannot mean that everyone's wants can be met, and that decisions have to be made about the society's direction and focus, and about priorities. More than one society has learned the hard way that generating a strategy that is highly-inclusive, but amounts to a wish-list, means that the exercise has produced no useful result. On the other hand, societies stress the importance of being as inclusive as possible, and then thinking hard about different views and interests, in order to generate buy-in and shared ownership.

> *'it's hard work trying to incorporate many different views, but the end result is worth it'*
>
> *'detailed discussion and final agreement of the plan must be done by the governing body, but providing opportunities for others to have their say and recognising those voices along the way means your plans are better informed, understood, accepted and appreciated'*

How much of all this can be done depends of course on the time and other resources available to support the exercise. Many societies stress the importance of not rushing, and some say that they would extend the process next time if possible. Of the larger societies we spoke to, many suggested that they had taken about a year on their most recent exercise. But other smaller societies with fewer resources to devote to strategy exercises took much less time.

Implementation of strategy

Both our survey respondents and our case study societies were very much aware of the risk that strategies on which they had devoted much effort might achieve little more than sitting on a shelf, with little or no reference made to them by officers, trustees, staff or members. But one of our case study societies suggested that strategy is properly thought of as a process and way of thinking that permeates throughout the society's work and its people. Thought of in this way, if a strategy is not widely understood and endorsed, and regularly consulted, used, reviewed and monitored, it is not working.

> *'production of the strategic plan is only the start, not the end of the process'*

We heard that some society Presidents and Chief Executives thus keep a short version of the strategy to hand at all times, consult it regularly as an aid to decision-making, and refer to it regularly in communications with members. Successful implementation thus involves a number of different features.

Communicating the strategy

Many of our case study societies as well as respondents to our surveyemphasised that while strategies must be owned above all by the trustees and senior officers of the society it is nevertheless critically important too that they must be effectively communicated to all members, staff, and key stakeholder groups, so that they get a clear sense of the society's core purposes and direction, how the activities they see or are involved in contribute to those purposes and direction, and how decisions about those activities fit into a wider framework.

The case study societies in particular thus stressed that the key benefits of any strategy will be lost unless both the strategy itself, and progress towards key goals, are regularly communicated to all these groups. While it is important that strategies and plans should be regularly consulted and used by officers, trustees and senior staff, they will not realise their full potential if such people are the only ones who are aware of them. Thus one society found from a recent survey that members do not know,

but would like to know, about its strategic plan and how the work-plans and programmes of activity relate to it. We have noted comments from other societies that suggest this may be a fairly common experience. The society in question has therefore decided to devote greater efforts to communicating with members about how the plan translates into activity programmes that are delivering against the society's strategic objectives.

At a narrower level, two or three of our case study societies have either remodelled their governance, to create new structures with office-holders whose responsibilities are directly linked to new sets of strategic goals, or intend to do so in response to future planning exercises. The thought here is that if the structures, and even the agendas for meetings of the governing body, are built around the strategy, it then permeates the programmes and activities of the society as a whole.

Embedding strategies in work-plans and budgets

One of the most important ways in which strategies and plans are made use of – and indeed made real and embedded in the life of the society - is in the development and adoption of related financial, business or work- plans. Among both the respondents to our survey and our case study societies, such plans are developed and implemented as part of an annual cycle. More than three-quarters of our survey respondents who have a plan in place expect their committees, and special interest and working groups, to take account of these plans and to report regularly on progress. And among the larger societies in particular, business, operational and work-plans for the society as a whole then feed into objectives and work-plans for individual members of staff.

Some of our respondents thus reported that as a result of creating and adopting a new strategy, they have adapted their annual plans and budgets so that they align with the new goals.

> *'we align our budgets and our activity plan and annual review to the four strategic goals'*

> '*the strategy forms the overarching framework for activity and operational plans which are used on a daily basis'*

But a small number of societies reported that failure to make use of the strategy in these kinds of ways – at the levels of both governing bodies and of individual officers and members of staff - has limited its effectiveness. One society reported that the impact of its strategic plan had been limited because while it was useful for staff, it was hardly referred to by its board of trustees. Another reported that

> *'we haven't developed a business plan, so we haven't been using the strategic plan effectively'*

Hence the advice from one of the respondents to our survey

> *'don't stop at the writing of the strategic plan. Make sure that you write a business plan alongside it to ensure delivery'*

Monitoring and reviewing progress

Respondents to our survey and our case study societies also stressed the importance of regular monitoring by both the governing body and senior members of staff, mostly on an annual basis although some societies have more regular monitoring by senior staff. Neither strategies nor annual plans are likely to be effective unless progress is regularly reviewed by senior staff and governing bodies. Many societies undertake annual reviews of progress and achievements, while some make such monitoring a standard item of business for each meeting of the governing body. In a few larger societies, this involves the creation and monitoring of key performance indicators (KPIs), though one of our survey respondents noted the risk of 'box-ticking' exercises. But there was widespread agreement that regular review is essential if strategies are to become reality. As one society put it

> '*regular monitoring is critical to embedding the strategy in the life of the society, so that it becomes fundamental to everything we do'*

Benefits of strategy

Both our survey respondents and our case study societies pointed to several different kinds of benefits that have arisen from strategy and planning exercises, including

- clarifying the society's purposes and setting a clear direction
- identifying and addressing key risks, issues and challenges, both in the internal and the external environments
- providing a coherent statement and thus helping to improve communications with staff, trustees, members and other stakeholders
- developing commitment from staff, trustees and members in working towards shared goals
- identifying priorities and resources required (time, expertise and energy as well as money); and to plan for and allocate the resources identified

Clarifying the society's purposes and setting a clear direction

Societies that are charities - and still more those that are chartered - have purposes set out in governing documents. But objects and purposes tend to be defined in very general terms, often drafted many years ago. Hence some societies that have developed new strategies have recognised the need to articulate more carefully and clearly the relationship between their current aims and objectives, and the purposes for which the society was originally founded, in order to take account of current circumstances both within the society and in the wider environment in which it operates. One chief executive suggested to us that as the external environment becomes more complex, societies that had given relatively low priority to strategic thinking and planning were now realising that strategy is central to their concerns and their well-being. Another suggested that a process of strategic thinking had given the society a

> *better understanding of the society as a charity, and therefore our mission'.*

Yet another said that the strategy is liberating:

> *the strategic aims are now linked clearly to the objects set out in the charter, and can be clearly communicated to everyone involved in the society, or interested in its work.*

The strategy also enables the society to hold itself to account for the work it does and the public good it seeks to achieve.

Several chief executives, trustees and respondents to our survey indicated that developing a strategy had enabled the society to determine key aims and objectives for the next three to five years, and thus to focus its programmes of activity on strategic goals or objectives rather than responding ad hoc to new developments or suggested initiatives. Typical comments were

> *'....it allowed us to take a step back and make sure that our activities met our goals'*

> *'..... enabled us to frame our activities in a more coherent way and to confirm that activities and aims were relevant and worthy but in need of updating'*

> *'more focused….continuing what we were doing before but doing it better*'

> *'provides clarity over the services the society provides, and their relative importance'.*

In this way, the strategies have also facilitated subsequent decision-making, about what to do, and also what not to do. Typical comments here were

> '*programmes of activity are increasingly driven by long-term objectives rather than ad hoc short-term desires'*
>
> *' we are not just reactive to changing circumstances'*

And a particular value of strategies is to set priorities and provide a framework for the development of new activities. As two of our interviewees put it, the strategy

> *'provides a yardstick against which to decide on new ideas'*
>
> *'[enables us] to say 'No' to requests to engage in activities that do not fall within the framework of the plan'.*

Identifying key issues and challenges

Many societies that publish scholarly journals have identified open access, and the policies to promote it, as key risks to their financial health and their ability to sustain their programmes of activity. But most of them see open access as a risk in the medium to long term. They see little impact on their journals at present, nor do they expect to see any significant impact in the short-to-medium term. Hence for the great majority of societies open access does not currently represent a 'burning bridge' and as yet it has featured relatively little in their discussions about strategy. Only two HSS societies of which we are aware - the Regional Studies Association and the Royal Geographical Society - have launched a new open access journal; and where societies and their publishing partners have shifted subscription journals to a hybrid model, take-up in the humanities and social sciences has to date been low (as is the case with fully-open-access journals in these disciplines). Nevertheless, societies and their publishing partners have had to ensure that all their journals are compliant with the new funder requirements relating to licensing, accessibility and embargo periods; and most remain concerned about the potential risks to their subscription income as open access becomes more widely adopted.

More commonly-identified external challenges include relationships with and competition from other societies or associations in related areas; relationships with key funders or funding sources; developments in the knowledge economy; changes in the demographic profile of the scholarly community; and the difficulties and risks faced by the seed-corn of the profession in the form of early-career researchers. A number of societies in the arts and humanities in particular are concerned about what they perceive as threats – from funding constraints and cuts, and reductions in student demand - to their discipline or subject area as a whole and the scholarly communities they represent. In such circumstances , attempts to broaden the membership and to promote the interests of the discipline may feature strongly in strategies for the future.

Other societies identified internal challenges as equally if not more important than the external ones, including concerns about the profile of the membership and how representative it is of the scholarly community and of other relevant stakeholder or interest groups; a realisation that the society lacks the capacity or the capability to take on new roles and activities; concerns about activities that have become loss-making; and unease about the adequacy of governance structures.

For some societies, challenges of this kind were one of the triggers leading to a decision to undertaken a strategic review. In other cases, where the challenges were not perceived as so imminently threatening, they were articulated, along with the risks that they posed and the actions to mitigate them, in the course of the review itself. One society sees its most recent strategic review as having had a profound effect in changing it from an inward-looking and elitist body to one which is much more open to all who have an interest in the discipline.

Improving communications with staff, trustees, members and other stakeholders

The respondents to our survey and our case study interviewees both spoke of the importance of a clear strategy document in both internal and external communications. . Several mentioned the value of the strategy for internal audiences such as members, staff and trustees in helping them to understand why certain decisions are being taken, for example in relation to the development of new activities, or the cessation of existing ones.

Externally, the strategy can also help, as one society put it, *'to improve the image of the [society]',* which is thus better able to attract new members, and also to attract and retain external funders and supporters. Another society thus talked of the importance of being able to take the strategy to funders and say *'this is what we do and how we intend to do it'*. Yet other societies mentioned the enhanced credibility that a clear strategy generates for their advocacy and lobbying activities, which they feel are more likely to receive a positive response in the light of the strategy. For all these reasons, one society decided as part of its strategy, to remodel all its communications, and to establish a new website, while another said that it is now more responsive and outward-facing, making use of social media and '*ready to put its head above the parapet'*. Another decided to produce podcasts from presentations at conferences and seminars, and from lectures aimed at sixth form students, so that they could reach audiences far beyond those who could attend physically.

Generating commitment from staff, trustees and members

Many societies that have developed and implemented strategies recently spoke of its value in providing clarity of purpose for all those involved in a society and its work, enhancing understanding between members, staff and trustees, and thus serve as a powerful motivating force. Typical comments included

> *'it is motivating for staff and trustees, who are driven by the achievement of goals'*
>
> *'including staff, trustees, and members together in the process creates a shared sense of purpose'*
>
> *'it has helped staff see how what they are doing contributes directly to the strategic ambition of the society'*
>
> *'helped the senior management team engage more meaningfully with the Board in strategic considerations rather than operational ones'*

More negatively, we heard in one or two cases of concerns that activities and priorities to which senior members or trustees were much attached have been excluded when strategic plans have been drawn up. We consider the processes used by societies to generate their strategies and plans in Section 5.5.

Identifying priorities and the resources required to achieve them

Many societies told us that they recognised the need to confront pressures to do more than they are reasonably able to do, and thus the need to determine priorities. They therefore talked of the need to take stock of the resources of expertise, time and energy as well as cash available in attempting to achieve strategic priorities; and also for more detailed work to allocate the necessary resources once the strategy has been agreed. But they also spoke of the benefits that arise when the allocation of resources is explicitly linked to strategic objectives. In some cases, this involved shifting resources from one activity to another. Typical remarks included

> *'it has enabled us to allocate resources to ensure that the focus is on achieving the strategic objectives, rather than just to what has been funded in the past'*
>
> *' a means of focusing resources on core aims and a small number of achievable objectives'*
>
> *'the approach is that the society should be doing more only if there is a clear advantage to the society and to beneficiaries … the strategic plan and the budget are now aligned.'*

In a few cases this meant restricting activities, or even shutting them down altogether.

> *'the catalyst for us to take a couple of big decisions such as stopping activities which were done for historic reasons and not helping us reach our goals'*
>
> *'the need to focus on valued services for members and not 'changing the world'.*

As a result, some societies believe they are now *'more sustainable'* and in at least one case a new strategy is said to have *'contributed to a move towards financial viability*'. One or two societies, however, found difficulty in finding an appropriate balance between ambition and 'blue skies' thinking on the one hand, and feasibility and sustainability on the other. One society found that its strategy was

> *'too large, too idealistic, not enough based on what is feasible'*

But from the other extreme, another found its current strategy

> *'focused on income, costs and service delivery – it does not have a blue skies element, nor foresight'.*

Innovations in activities and operations

Several societies pointed to ways in which a new strategy brought with it major developments in operations and structures as well as activities. A common theme across a number of medium to large-scale societies has been to re-organise their governance structures so that they fit better with current circumstances. In some cases this has taken the form of structuring the governance explicitly around the core goals or aims set out in the strategy (for example by assigning to each Vice President responsibility for one of those goals or aims). But in other cases, the re-organisation has been to reform a structure that had become outdated and/or ineffective.

In similar vein, other societies have taken the opportunity to revise the structures and processes surrounding their special interest groups (SIGs) so that they can operate more effectively (and freely) within the frameworks set by the society's overall strategy.

Other innovations have included

- initiating new grant schemes, or the enhancement of existing ones, typically by re-allocation of resources from other areas of activity
- using new technologies to expand the reach of existing activities by, for example, making conference, seminar and workshop presentations accessible online, or by live streaming from events, with facilities for submitting questions and comments online
- generating and circulating – with varying levels and different kinds of specialist help - expert briefing material on specialist topics, and also using such materials as the basis for enhancing contacts with mainstream and specialist media outlets and/or representatives of key stakeholder groups, so that material is to hand when need or opportunity arises.
- strengthening links with schools and colleges with the help of a new Teaching Group
- developing new publication programmes and partnerships
- merging with or absorbing related societies and organisations (which may be a trigger for initiating a strategy exercise; while in other cases the existence of the strategy has facilitated a merger).
- establishing a capacity for research and policy analysis in areas of interest to the society.

A common thread running through such innovations has been to shift the focus of the society and its activities so that it has become more outward-facing, in some cases at international as well as national levels.

5.4. Societies with no written strategy

As is clear from Section 3, a majority of societies, particularly among the smaller ones, do not have a formal written strategy. Reponses to our survey indicate that a quarter of those that fall into this group have discussed initiating an exercise to formulate a strategy, with the discussion stimulated by factors very similar to those pertaining with the societies that *do* have strategies: financial pressures, retirement and/or appointment of staff and trustees, a perceived need for strategic direction, and/or concerns about declining membership or relationships with other societies or stakeholder groups.

The major reason for not following up such discussions, or not even initiating them, is lack of time and/or resource. Nevertheless, a few societies have indicated that as a result of their interactions with the current project via the survey, interviews or focus group, they are now considering launching a strategy exercise. Moreover, a majority (54%) of our survey respondents which do not have a written strategy indicated that they thought that formulating one would bring some benefits to the society, including

- clarity of purpose and enabling members to understand the focus of activities;
- helping to identify priorities and the resources needed to achieve them;
- enabling the society to implement plans that are proactive rather than reactive;
- greater financial as well as developmental certainty;
- growth and attracting new members to the society
- providing a yardstick against which to assess progress

A small number of societies without written strategies also indicated, however, that while they have no single written document, they do have strategies and plans in relation to specific areas of activity; or that matters of strategic importance are regularly discussed by the governing body (sometimes in the forum of an annual awayday), with decisions recorded in the minutes. At least one society has achieved significant shifts of strategic direction in this way. The key downside of such approaches is that it is more difficult for members and other stakeholders to see how such shifts fit into the overall direction of the society.

5.5. Resources needed and lessons learned

For smaller societies in particular, which rely on the voluntary efforts of officers and members in order to function at all, the time and resources to engage in strategy exercises, and to implement the strategies and plans that result from them, are significant barriers against even starting to develop a strategy. But respondents to our survey also indicated that they would find it helpful to have access to guidance, and advice from other societies, on how to set about strategic planning; examples of the plans that have been produced, and illustrations of the tangible benefits that have arisen from them.. This report and the guidance and case studies attached to it are an attempt to meet that need.

There is no single template for a strategy exercise, nor indeed for a strategic plan; nor can there be. For while there are generic issues and questions - of the kind set out in this report and the associated guidance - that should be addressed in any strategy exercise, the ways in which they can most effectively be addressed will vary according to the circumstances of the particular society. Moreover, even those societies with considerable experience of strategies and planning report that they have learned lessons from the most recent exercise and plan; and most of them say that they will do things differently next time:

- spending more (or in a few cases less) time on the exercise
- making greater efforts at the beginning, middle and end of the process to consult and engage with members, staff and, in a few cases, with external stakeholders

- using a wider range of mechanisms – workshops, surveys, focus groups, email discussion forums and the like – to secure he engagement they seek from members and other groups
- encouraging those engaged in the process to be more ambitious and creative
- managing the process more closely to 'keep it real'
- focusing on the most important areas
- using outside experts or facilitators to assist in the process
- paying more attention to relationships with other societies, and developments that affect their disciplinary and subject communities
- focusing more on national policy developments and the scholarly and educational contexts in which the society operates
- focusing more on international opportunities

Such changes do not all point in the same direction, and the list thus illustrates how strategies, and the processes that generate them, must fit with the circumstances of individual societies. As one society puts it

> *'look at other models so you are not starting from scratch, but recognise that no one solution fits all'*

Hence in our guidance we point to ways in which societies can locate themselves within the landscape of other societies, who may themselves be able to offer guidance to their colleagues.