

AGM – Chair’s Report

As Chair of the South West Fed I am delighted to welcome you to our 89th AGM, my second as Chair.

Last year I reported at the AGM and conveyed a note of caution regarding the fed’s future. As was detailed in the financial report, the Fed was very vulnerable due to the change in funding arrangements with SWMDP and the spending down of reserves to invest in new staffing and a new website. I pressed the urgency of finding a more sustainable and at that time, a higher income generating model for the future.

That was before anyone had heard of Covid-19.

Before I convey what this has meant for the Fed, we have had some highlights it is important to remember:

- We held our 2019 Conference in partnership with the University of Plymouth with a record number of attendees. We explored the theme; Inspiring Audiences: Home and Away with exceptional speakers and workshops and great networking events across the two days.
- The Autumn Forum was the last major event on our calendar that went ahead as normal. Held in October 2019 at Gloucester Cathedral, we explored *Interpretation of the Historic Environment*. The event was fully booked and speakers included one of the UK’s top Interpretive Design Consultants, Imagemakers and Gloucester Cathedral’s Head of Visitor Experience, Lorna Giles who delivered a ground-breaking interpretation scheme for the 1,000 year old site as part of a £6M development project. There was no Spring Forum due to lockdown being enforced at that time.
- In the run up to March this year the Bristol mingles continued with great success and the Fed Board met regularly, moving around the South West and holding peer to peer sessions at various heritage sites in Bath, Bodmin and Street.

Whilst this report is primarily a summary of our activity from March 2019 – March 2020, given the significance of our current circumstances and the importance of the resolutions being voted on, I would like to take some time to reflect on the journey our board has been on since lockdown was announced.

When we found ourselves unable to run the physical conference this year it became clear the Fed would be operating at a deficit by the end of the Summer. An Arts Council England grant was applied for and I am pleased and relieved to say, was granted. This has enabled the Fed to continue its operations but this aid ceases at the end of the year.

I have been impressed and hugely grateful for the support, commitment and hard work of the board, to help us realise a new strategy for the future. When we move to later items in the agenda and hold the votes on the proposed resolutions, I ask that you will consider supporting our new approach and helping to secure the future of the Fed as it looks ahead to its 90th birthday next year.

The proposed strategy is focussed on moving in a very different direction to the one being considered this time last year. It is about reducing our core costs, provide a more accessible membership and delivering our programme of networking and sharing best practice in a new way. We are looking to step away from the physical forums and conference, both due to the need for effective social distancing and in order to reduce financial risks created by the constantly changing regulations. We are focussed on a new and more viable model that can be delivered within the capacity of our board. The new proposed roles are a means of

giving ownership back to the board and focussing on the skills and experience required to create a new digital programme that holds relevance for the South West and show cases the best that our nine counties have to offer. Our core news and jobs services would continue, keeping members informed but also providing a means by which all of you, whether individual or institutional members, will be able to share this with us, so we can cascade it across the region.

It is worth noting that the current grant will enable us to buy ourselves out of our website contract and pay for the professional support we need to transition our communications, membership and programming activity. We have to spend this resource by the end of the year to meet the terms of the grant. If we are not able to pass the resolutions and make these changes, the financial constraints we face, without support from you to invest in this change, will require the organisation to fold due to the inability to meet our core costs. If passed, we will review success a year from now, to really understand the nature and potential of the Fed's future.

As always, the work of the Fed has been achieved by volunteers and one very part time member of staff. I am hugely thankful for their support during what has been a challenging time for many of us who have juggled childcare, board responsibilities, periods of furlough, the need to carry on working, or those who have faced and are facing uncertainty in terms of continued employment. I would also like to thank our members for your continued support and commitment to the work of the Fed, especially those who have continued their membership and renewed during this period of financial uncertainty. We have seen membership and event attendance fall significantly and our new model is aimed at making membership accessible to everyone so I am hopeful we will see a period of growth that puts the Fed at the heart of the sector, providing contact and support at this critical and devastating time.

Finally, I'd like to thank those who are leaving the board this year. Those stepping down are our longest serving member Verity Anthony (Cornwall), Jane Marley (South Gloucestershire), Estelle Gilbert (Somerset) and Simon Hobson (Wiltshire) who moved out of the region some time ago now. We also say goodbye to our Meetings Secretary for Fora, Theo Platt.

Thank you all, and I wish you all well and hope you will continue to support the Fed and follow our progress. Those who are standing for new roles and standing to stay in current roles, thank you for your continued support and I look forward to working with you to take the Fed through what will be a transformational year, whichever way the vote goes later.