

Oral History Society's Chair's report 2014

In September last year, the Oral History Society's elected Trustees met over a weekend to discuss a new strategic plan for the Society. Our overall aim was to find ways by which we could continue to support oral history as it expands across a range of different settings (see my 2013 report). As the leading oral history organisation in Britain, the Trustees recognised at the meeting that the Society should be in a position to support and campaign for those who wish to record, preserve memories, and engage with our diverse pasts. In doing so, we not only understand that there are increasing opportunities in promoting oral history, but that there are a number of challenges ahead.

In stating their commitment to help develop the Society as a dynamic, accessible, organisation representing those engaged in oral history, the Trustees identified three priority areas. The first of these is the preservation and (re)use of oral history. Given the ongoing cuts in public expenditure, we are concerned to defend curation and archiving and explore alternative sources of financial support for these activities where we can.

The second area is in the teaching of oral history in higher education, as part of a longer-term goal to increase the profile of oral history in formal learning generally. While demand in the sector has exploded, matching resources, especially in permanent staff teaching validated courses, has not. We recognise that the expansion of higher education has meant that a larger proportion of the population is attending university, and that we need to develop the framework and capacity for teaching oral history within undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. We are therefore seeking to embed oral history teaching in universities.

Any doubts that we need to engage with oral history in higher education were dispelled earlier this year when oral history became central to international news stories surrounding the Boston College Belfast Project. The Trustees, after reflection and debate, issued a statement on the legal and political implications for oral history (see http://www.ohs.org.uk/documents/OHS_Statement_Boston_College_Belfast_Project_May2014.pdf). While we do not believe that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) seizures of oral histories held by Boston College changes the legal and ethical advice we give (see <http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics.php>), the case, however, should act as a reminder that we have to continue to disseminate, promote and apply that advice.

The third priority area for Trustees is funding for oral history. We want to continue to, and expand, our representation of oral history with funders. We have had past success, most

notably with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Similarly, the Wellcome Trust's support for our past conferences and residential training has been exemplary. In the next period, we wish to develop similar close ties to the research councils as well as to major charities.

These are our priorities, but we also intend to continue to deliver the support to community organisations, including through the Regional Network. We also want to continue to develop our journal *Oral History*, our website and our newsletter. Other activities, such as schools' oral history, are beginning to draw in energetic members of the Society. However, areas prioritised by Trustees, as well as activities driven by the membership more broadly, will require structural reform. The Trustees are therefore working on building a sustainable organisational and governance structure that can meet current demand and lays the groundwork for coping with future developments.

The Trustees have taken a number of decisions to support these developments. This includes increasing membership charges. Rates had remained the same since 2007, and we concluded that at £30 the new individual fee represents good value, considering the discounts on conferences and training, as well as two journals a year and free access to journal back copies through JSTOR. The increase will help to support new initiatives, including offering new membership benefits and a 'supporter's scheme' that is intended to increase our active membership. New membership packages will also include offering all members the possibility of creating special interest groups. Craig Fees, one of our Trustees has created the first of these, Oral History and Psycho-Social Therapies.

We want to continue our joint training offering along current lines. Last year the Society ran 66 training courses (including 52 tailored courses) with 723 participants. Fifteen introductory days, attracted 178 people. The courses continue to be rated as excellent amongst almost all participants and we acknowledge the work that our trainers do on behalf of the Society.

Only eleven per cent of last year's trainees were Society members, suggesting that training is now reaching beyond our membership and that we have the potential to recruit more members. We are therefore rebranding training provision jointly as 'Oral History Society and National Life Stories at the British Library'. This rebranding recognises changes within the British Library, while strengthening the Society's profile and reinforcing our collaboration with an internationally renowned archive that has set new standards in the curation of oral history. In addition, the Training Group is preparing new courses, as a result of demand, in

project management, and archiving/data management. A levy to support development has been included in new course charges for our tailored training provision.

Kate Melvin, our Membership Secretary, presented and led the discussion on membership at our strategy meeting. Following Kate's review, the Trustees decided that the Society should remain a membership organisation with at least the present levels of services and benefits. Kate is currently coordinating on-going work in designing membership packages for different groups of members such as freelancers, archivists and so on. It was decided that a new, parallel tier of membership would be created, that of a 'Supporter Network'. This would include a database of those who wish to support the Society and its work but who are not yet members. It was felt that this list should grow organically rather than be 'created'. Key information about 'supporters' would be held including basic demographics, details about their oral history activities and where their interests lay. The 'supporters' would be kept up to date with news and campaigns.

Our strategic aims are ambitious and we want to draw on the skills, knowledge and energies of the Society's membership and the wider periphery. The 2014 AGM will not only offer an opportunity for members to discuss the strategic plan, but to contribute ideas and help shape the future of oral history. We will also discuss governance matters, with Trustees recommending some changes to our Constitution around life memberships. In addition, we will be updating our diversity and inclusion policies thanks to Sarah Lowry, who has drawn up on behalf of the Trustees an inclusion strategy and action plan.

Sarah, in analysing reports from the Society's Training Team and our past conference organisers, has concluded that community organisations representing minority groups continue to be very active in oral history. She notes that, 'While it is encouraging that organisations are reaching out to the Society for training sessions and to speak at our conferences, it is important that we look for opportunities to continue links with groups beyond initial contact.'

Along with another Trustee, Mary Stewart, Sarah is also planning to trial a series of evening events in London in accessible community venues. Sarah and Mary will invite a speaker to open debate on a topical issue and encourage discussion. The events will present an opportunity for practitioners, and particularly those that have attended training sessions, to continue receiving support from the Society. Over the next twelve months, Sarah is planning to lead on a number of initiatives including developing more opportunities for volunteers to

get involved in the Society's work and reorganising nominations procedures for both the Trustees committee and the Regional Network to make processes more open and transparent.

As already indicated, the new strategic plan will mean building on existing activities including our successful and vibrant Regional Network. On behalf of the Oral History Society's Regional Network, Juliana Vandegrift (Regional Network Coordinator) and Padmini Broomfield (Deputy Regional Network Coordinator) report that we have added a new networker in Yorkshire: Simon Bradley, a community digital artist who specialises in digital media, voice and memory. Juliana and Padmini also note that three Regional Networkers have left the network in the last twelve months. David Lee (South East), has retired from the Hampshire Record Office, Janet Nixon is moving to Devon and Solomon Yohannes (London) has changed career. Janet, David and Solomon have been valued members of the Regional Network for many years and we will miss them and wish them good luck in their new ventures.

In November 2013 the Regional Network held its annual event at Manchester Metropolitan University hosted by Fiona Cosson. The well-attended meeting opened with Jo Reilly, Head of Participation and Learning at the HLF presenting the organisation's new funding framework. Padmini Broomfield outlined our new five-year strategy plan on behalf of the Oral History Society's Trustees to members of the Network and sought their feedback. In the afternoon local oral history groups presented their projects, including one from Stephen Kelly on his Granada Television project. Juliana and Padmini have announced that the 2014 Regional Network event will be in London with the theme of memory and the First World War.

As well as compiling and circulating a new information pack for Networkers, development work by Juliana and Padmini has resulted in a redesign of the Network's web pages (see <http://www.ohs.org.uk/region.php>). A plan for an improved social media presence has also been prepared. These initiatives are good examples of how Trustees are attending to improving communication and encouraging greater membership involvement in the Society.

Similarly, we are developing the Society's website to promote a stronger dialogue with members. Under the purview of our web team, led by Michelle Winslow, the site now includes a query application for members. The introduction of this 'Contact Us' facility in April 2013 has, Michelle reports, proved popular. In the first twelve month period 202 questions were received. The requests for information include training, equipment, archiving,

funding, membership, research methods, interviewing technique, project planning, transcription, and volunteering. Michelle as Website Coordinator answers most questions, but where specific expertise is needed queries are passed to an appropriate Society representative, including members of the Regional Network.

Our web pages continue to provide information about resources and advice regarding best practice. The site remains our main tool for attracting members and for booking training courses, conferences and seminars. It is also likely that as we increase our focus on campaigning, the website will be an even greater part in the Society's life.

Michelle, also reports that over the last year, that the most frequently visited webpage was 'Is your oral history ethical and legal', receiving an average of 1,000 hits per month. These pages, updated by Rob Perks and Joanna Bornat, contain a wealth of information that relate to doing oral history in a variety of settings. Associated sub-pages were also well-accessed, with information about recording agreements most popular. Michelle also notes that throughout the year Vacancies as well as News and Events continually receive a high volume of visits. New pages have been added to increase our journal's visibility, and as a result *Oral History* now has a greater web presence.

The success of our website owes much to Anthony Greenwood our Web Administrator. Anthony will shortly be stepping down from this role. We are very sorry to have to say goodbye to Anthony and we wish him well in the future. Michelle has begun the process, with Anthony's help, of appointing a replacement.

Anne Gulland, our Publicity Officer, and member of our Communications group with Michelle, is playing a major role in improving our social media presence. The Society now has close to 2000 Twitter followers. And, as well as updating our Facebook page, Anne has kept our presence relevant on LinkedIn. Anne regularly writes blog posts for the Oral History Noticeboard, including useful reports of our joint research seminars with the Institute of Historical Research. As part of our strategy, Anne has concentrated this year on improving our direct communications with members, mainly through the newsletter and is aiming to provide short reports of the Trustees quarterly committee meetings.

As already indicated, the Trustees have reconfirmed our commitment to oral history in Higher Education (HE). Our HE Group, coordinated by Jenny Harding, was set up in response to a perceived lack of institutional support for the increasing use of oral history across a range of disciplines in teaching and research in HE. Jenny reports that the 'OHS HE

Network' was launched in February 2014 and is open to all UK HE researchers, lecturers, and postgraduate students.

Thanks to Fiona Cosson, an oral history strand is to be included in the 2014 annual Higher Education Authority conference for History teaching and learning ('Teaching Outside of the Classroom'). The HE group has also collaborated with the Institute for Historical Research in presenting a third series of evening seminars (organised by Shelley Trower, Michelle Winslow and Anne Gulland) and a third Advanced School (organised and taught by Joanna Bornat, Jenny Harding, Graham Smith and Joel Morley).

Trustees recognise our journal *Oral History* as the main way that the Society discusses, develops and disseminates ideas about oral history theory and practice. The journal has enjoyed a good year with two issues demonstrating the continuing breadth of oral history research as well as new areas of investigation and interpretation with articles clustered around the themes of 'Conflict' and 'Institutions'.

Reporting on behalf of the editors, Joanna Bornat, notes that, 'We were sorry to have to part with Arthur McIvor who had ably filled the job of Reviews Editor for the last four years and delighted when Anindya Raychaudhuri moved over from assistant to taking over full responsibility for reviews. We're most grateful to Arthur for his work for the journal.' The editors continue to look at ways to expand the reviews section, so, if you want to review an oral history related product or publication, please do not hesitate get in touch with Anindya (details are available from <http://www.ohs.org.uk/journal.php>).

Since spring 2013, *Oral History* has had an International Editorial Advisory Board. We very much appreciate the affirmation and support the members offer the Society and its journal. During the year the editors have sought help from individual members of the advisory group with regard to both general advice and article reviewing. The editorial team plan to draw members of the Board more closely into the work of the journal during the coming period reinforcing journal's contribution to oral history across the world.

During the year, the editors advertised in order to fill the two editorial group vacancies. Helen Graham, Learning editor, had announced her intention to resign in the early part of 2014. In response, the editors expressed their very great appreciation of the excellent contribution which the Learning section has made to the journal while she has been in charge. Interviews for replacement editors took place earlier this year and we are pleased to be able to report that Hayley Moyse and Fiona Cosson were offered the two posts of Learning editor and Public

History editor, respectively. Both have accepted, on a probationary basis and each will work with a mentor from amongst the longer established members of the editorial team.

Joanna also reports that in order to reduce the amount of work that editors carry out, on a voluntary basis, as they prepare each issue for publication and to ensure that the journal continues to maintain a professional standard, it was decided, in consultation with the Society's Trustees that the editors should work with a copy editor. In due course, Richard Fontenoy was appointed.

The journal editors continue to receive invitations to discuss possible publication from commercial publishers but continue to prefer to maintain an independent position. The editors are taking further advice to enhance the journal's business position and engagement with academic and non-academic readers in the coming months. Meanwhile the editors continue to affirm their commitment to ensuring our quality journal remains affordable and accessible.

As part of this strategy, back copies of the journal will continue, as stated above, to be available to all through JSTOR (see <http://www.ohs.org.uk/jstor-online.php> or <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ohs>). In the last year, through JSTOR, *Oral History* articles were viewed 39,164 times with 24,497 downloads of articles made from back copies of the journal.

The editorial team were particularly pleased that the 2013 Annual conference of the Oral History Society generated several articles which we have been published in the journal. 'Corporate Voices: Institutional and Organisational Oral Histories', held at the University of Sussex last July was an exciting event, and, as well as all the speakers, I would like to thank our organising team and our conference partners the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research, University of Sussex.

In closing, I want to express my appreciation for all the work undertaken by the Society's Trustees over the last year. I would also like to thank my fellow officers, Robert Wilkinson (Treasurer) and Rob Perks (Secretary) for their contributions in what has proved a year of challenges. Our five yearly reviews require additional time and effort, but generate ideas that will, I hope, inspire and re-energise the Society and its members. The 2013 review will shape the next phase of the Society's development in a changing world.