



The Royal Society
of Literature

**RESPONSE OF THE R.S.L. COUNCIL
TO THE AUDIENCE AGENCY'S SURVEY
OF FELLOWS, MEMBERS AND SUBSCRIBERS
September 2016**

We are very grateful to everyone who completed the questionnaire. We realise it was rather long, particularly for those who have taken part in several RSL events. Your comments and ideas have proved tremendously helpful as we plan for the Society's future. We hope that this dialogue will continue as developments come on stream: please keep letting us know your experiences of and ideas for our work.

Overall, it is heartening to see from the survey that the RSL's events, magazine and other established activities are rated highly by the large majority of our Fellows, Members and e-newsletter subscribers. This high opinion makes clear that whatever new initiatives we may introduce, we need to maintain the current activities that are so warmly appreciated by our core supporters.

The caveat is that in order to maintain existing activities – let alone initiate new ones – we need to **raise more money**. Despite being Royal, we are not a wealthy Society. We currently keep going by spending from reserves. These are not extensive. So we are very pleased to find from the survey that the second highest motivation for being a Member of the RSL (after free entry to events) is to support our work as a charity.

We are delighted that, when asked about goals for the RSL to pursue, respondents to the survey gave the highest priority to “acting as a national voice for the value of literature”. This falls into line with the theme that we have set as our strategic goal for the years leading into our bicentenary in 2020: “**Literature Matters**”. We will be initiating talks, publications, online resources and projects to generate discussion about why and how great writing matters in the contemporary world.

While we are pleased to find that our public **events** are well-regarded, we have taken on board the need for a more consistent and accessible venue. We hope our new partnership with the British Library will address this. We are also working to improve our online booking system. In terms of ideas for future events, respondents' views varied widely, especially in the written comments – with some arguing strongly for us to include younger, more diverse speakers and literary forms, others arguing equally passionately that the RSL should avoid following fashions and stick to established literary traditions. Our intention is to be a broad enough church to encompass both

these perspectives. We will aim for our programme to include a mix of event styles and content, balancing innovation and tradition.

We all agree that we need to undertake more **activities out of London**. We are building partnerships with universities and festivals to do just this. We have made a start and, in autumn 2016, the RSL will be at Liverpool University and Birmingham Literature Festivals.

We recognise that the demographic data from the survey is only partial: for example, we know that we have Black Caribbean and Black African writers amongst our Fellows, though none are shown in the survey results. We also know that we need to gather more comprehensive data about our Fellows and Members, and improve **diversity** in many of our activities. We have incorporated this ambition into our 4-year strategy, which will include an Audience Development Plan, and we are just starting to revise our equality policy. We have tasked our new Programmes Committee with ensuring diversity of speakers and topics in our public events, and have already made some progress through new partnerships, e.g. with the Bare Lit and the Africa Writes festivals.

In terms of **RSL Fellowship**, we note both that some Fellows feel little connection with the Society and that many others would like to be more involved. Our new Fellowships and Awards Committee will look both at the election process and ongoing engagement. As soon as funds allow, we plan to boost this area of our work with a new dedicated post of Fellowship Manager.

We see that our **Members** are wide-ranging in their views about future RSL developments, but have a real wish to meet other literature-lovers and to be connected with the Society. In response, we will be holding informal consultation events with Members in autumn 2016 to explore some of your ideas in more detail. We would like to establish ongoing social events or forums. Given that young people are under-represented among our constituents, one of the consultation events will be specially for under 30s. Perhaps there is room for a permanent Young Members' Forum to encourage socialising and to generate new ideas.

We will think carefully about the priority given by many of the survey respondents to **supporting emerging writers**. Given that our Masterclasses inevitably reach small numbers of people, most of whom appear to have attended plenty of other creative writing courses, we question whether direct provision of training or mentoring is appropriate for the RSL: many other organisations are better placed to offer this sort of provision, to which we can act as a gateway (perhaps even arranging discounts or other help for our Members). The RSL's distinctive contribution to emerging writers is more likely to be through our awards, prizes, events and publications.

Once more, thank you for all your responses and do stay in touch.