

UKNOF 2020 Annual Report

It goes without saying that, as for everyone, 2020 was a challenging year for UKNOF. The pandemic situation compounded existing sustainability challenges we were already facing, driving many changes in our assumptions and how we operate. Our team however, grasped the importance of connectedness and community to keep the Internet that everyone came to rely on so heavily for everyday work and life running well, and rose to the challenge. While the path so far, and onward to whatever becomes the new sustainable "normal" remains uncertain and demanding, UKNOF enters 2021 with sufficient resources to stay this path. We have also learned some valuable lessons and taken the chance to make beneficial changes and improvements.

Meeting Sustainability

UKNOF45 in January was conducted as a regular successful meeting with little inkling of what lay ahead. Attendance was down by perhaps 20% compared to the previous year's London event, but some limited charging for attendance meant the event was able to break even despite the long-term decline in sponsor support.

We took steps during Q1 to move our original venue commitment for UKNOF46 in April as soon as it became clear how serious the pandemic impact on event-running was likely to be, and started planning for virtual events for as long as necessary, running 4 well-received short-form *virtualUKNOF* events in May, July, September and November.

Platforms, processes, content and audience were very much a work-in-progress and evolved during the year, but attendee feedback indicates we upheld our high content quality, that UKNOF was regarded as one of the better-run online-only events; and we did not lose money.

While the hard running costs of online meetings are less than physical meetings, they do have some unique challenges which impact UKNOF's sustainability. It's important to understand that at least for now, the soft costs of chargeable effort required to run an online-only meeting are **more**, not less than a physical meeting. All UKNOF paid contractors are required to submit an estimate of their hours at the start of each year for Board budgetary approval, and for 2020 the hours worked were about 15% above estimates. There's a number of reasons behind this:

- Many of the tasks that can easily be performed by a squad of volunteers for a physical event are not so easy to delegate or distribute for an online event.
- More non-visible back-end activity is required to support a smooth and professional online event at scale, e.g. registration integration, video production, speaker rehearsals.
- The pandemic is an evolving situation, and many major changes to operations require additional effort to implement. Some of this has been experimental in nature, some successful, some not so much. While a lot of this may be an investment in new ways of working for the future, the path out of the pandemic promises further such one-off effort and costs.

We've compared notes with others in the event-running industry, and their experiences are consistent with ours.

It's also more difficult to generate revenue from online-only events, with fewer opportunities for sponsor visibility, and less perceived value in attendee registration payment. We experimented with some limited charging for our short online events to test attendee sensitivity. UKNOF46 has also been a bit of a corner case for registration charging - as our first long-form event since it was originally postponed, we finished up with many paying attendees from that willingly rolling up their pre-paid registrations forwards to the Jan 2021 incarnation. This meant offering too many free spaces would have been unfair to these paying supporters. See the Strategy document for more details, but we plan to not charge registration for online-only events for the rest of 2021.

There were additionally lessons to be learned about event pacing - even short-form online events every 2 months turned out to be quite demanding on the team, and we plan to go with lower-frequency longer-form meetings during 2021.

Mattermost Chat Platform

We also decided it was important to support the community with additional online collaborative tools, and mid-year we launched our new *Mattermost*-based Chat platform. This was an opportunity to address feedback on our use of IRC as a meeting remote participation platform, and replace it with something more inclusive, that would attract new industry entrants used to modern/mobile instant messaging tools. The idea was to address 3 requirements:

- Remote participation in UKNOF events
- A meeting place for the community, particularly during lock-down
- Co-ordination of UKNOF's volunteers and activities

The chance to operate this based on a cost-effective non-lockin hosting arrangement with our existing service provider arose, and it was smoothly launched during the May/July events. UKNOF Mattermost Chat appears to have been well-received, with strong adoption among our committees and volunteer community.

Communications, Branding

The Communications Committee (CC), tasked with UKNOF outreach and social media presence, was formed in late 2019. In order to co-ordinate and structure CC activities, the Board in October 2020 appointed Leo Vegoda as CC Chair on a 40 hours/year contract basis for 2021. Leo has already done invaluable work in defining a Charter for the CC, and is also contributing more generally to documenting and improving UKNOF processes. Like the Programme Committee (PC) Chair, Leo attends UKIF Board meetings on an observer basis. Regular monthly meetings of the CC are now being held.

The design process for UKNOF's new logo was delegated to the newly-formed CC, and we launched this in early 2020. This addressed some negative feedback we'd had on the old logos, and gave us a fresh new branding for our increased online presence.

Governance

As 2020 progressed, it became clear that the management bandwidth required to deal both with the pandemic-evolution and sustainability challenges, and the very wide range of views of what and how UKNOF should be in that context, was much greater than we'd been used to.

To that end, during August the Board formally appointed Nigel Titley as Chair, and switched to regular monthly Board meetings. To improve interaction and transparency, we also introduced regular reports to the committees of the key points from each Board meeting.

There were a number of committee changes during the course of the year. We would like to thank **Bob Sleigh**, who has stepped down from the PC after many years of service, and also **Stephen Morris**, whom we wish the very best for his retirement after standing down as ISC's representative on the Advisory Committee (AC). We'd like to welcome **Ray Bellis**, **Kurtis Lindqvist** and **Hisham Ibrahim** to the AC as the new representatives for ISC, LINX and RIPE NCC respectively. And a welcome to our new PC Members: **James Bensley & Ben Cox**; and new CC Member, **Portia Rabonda**.

As we operate neither critical services, big budgets, nor essential resources, UKNOF employs a lightweight governance model. A property of this is that the UKIF Ltd Board is appointed rather than elected. During the UKIF Ltd AGM in October, Denesh Bhabuta and Liz Stevens were re-appointed as Directors by rotation for further 3-year terms.

We do however seek to operate with best practice transparency and accountability to the community, which we pursue through our open Annual Meeting, and the Advisory and other Committees. It is important the Board reflects and is engaged with the UKNOF community. We also recognise that many existing Board Directors have been in-service for many years, and have been thinking collectively about succession planning.

To this end, we are currently seeking individuals that would be willing to become new Board members. The established process is that before any such individuals are appointed, the Board will consult with the committees on these appointments to ensure they have the confidence of the community. Please contact any Board member if you are interested in volunteering to serve, or wish to suggest a candidate.

Strategy and 2021 Plans

In order to find our way through and out of the pandemic and the long-term changes it is likely to cause, and to address UKNOF's longer-term sustainability challenges, the Board has produced a 2021 Strategy Document, which will guide the year's budget and business planning. This has been a process, encompassing a diversity of views, and is shared for review and discussion at the Annual Meeting.

While we are all very much in an evolving situation, the Board believes this strategy is the best next step on UKNOF's way forwards, and encourage you to read, improve and support it to continue UKNOF's mission and sustainability.

Planning for 2021's activities and budget on the basis of what is in the strategy document has begun. It has been decided in consultation with the Manchester venue that the April 2021 UKNOF47 meeting will take place as an online-only event. Financial planning for 2021 will be done on a 6-month rather than annual basis, with a mid-year review of whether we hold a physical meeting after August, and/or further online/hybrid meetings.

Finally, I'd like to take the chance to thank everyone, not least those who give their valuable time and money, but also our wider community, for sticking with UKNOF through this difficult time and helping make a difference. 2020 has demonstrated that our community is resilient, our mission remains relevant, and that there is a future to look forward to.

Keith Mitchell
UKIF Managing Director
January 2021