

# UKNOF 2023 Annual Report

For the past decade or more, UKNOF has been run on the basis of UKIF Ltd providing the legal entity, operations, and financial basis for running UKNOF's activities. This has been combined with a lightweight governance approach, using volunteer support, together with oversight and accountability to the community through various committees.

While this worked well-enough for much of UKNOF's existence, previous annual reports have made it clear that UKNOF has been having sustainability struggles for a few years now, and during 2023 it became clear that the existing UKNOF/UKIF model is no longer viable.

We did however run two in-person meetings during 2023, [UKNOF51](#), in Manchester in April and [UKNOF52](#) in London in September.

These were successful from a content, attendance and logistics point of view, with many well-received talks and great community support and participation. Unfortunately they were less successful financially, and the deficit from these events impacted UKNOF's reserves to the point where combined with outstanding liabilities, we can no longer commit to running future events.

We've also been experiencing challenges with finding and funding the people needed to do the dull but essential aspects of running UKIF Ltd as a business.

The UKIF Board has thus sadly decided we are no longer able to continue running UKNOF, and plans to wind up UKIF Ltd during 2024.

We are therefore calling upon the community to find solutions to continue the spirit and practice of everything that is valuable in UKNOF, via some new structure and/or entity. I'm pleased to see various UK Internet institutions and community members have stepped up, and there will be a chance at the UKNOF Annual Meeting to hear more about their plans, which I hope all of you will feel able to engage with and support.

## Events: UKNOF51 and UKNOF52

[UKNOF51](#) took place in Manchester in April, a 1½ day event culminating our long-standing commitment to the Manchester Central venue. Content was strong with some 17 presentations, mostly in-person with a few remote speakers. There were some 100 attendees, and we were able to have a session recognising the volunteer contributions of the organisations behind UKNOF's Advisory Committee, which was formally disbanded at that meeting.

For [UKNOF52](#) in September, we returned to the 15Hatfields venue repeating the 1½ day format. Attendance was slightly higher at 124 participants, and 13 presentations. We also announced a hiatus in UKNOF meetings at that point, making the sustainability challenges we face very clear and asking for the community's help.

## Appointments and Succession

Quite a lot of effort over the past few years has gone into encouraging diversity and fresh blood into the volunteer squad that runs UKNOF, including succession planning for Board Directors.

This has been successful for both the Communications and Programme Committees, and in particular we have recently boosted the PC headcount. High-quality meeting content remains very much a key UKNOF's strength, and there is enthusiasm in the existing PC to carry this forward into any successor organisation. A pipeline of speakers and presentations is being maintained, and they are being encouraged to work with the new structure.

I'd like to offer particular thanks to our former PC and CC Chairs, James Bensley and Leo Vegoda, who have done a huge amount of essential volunteer work in keeping things running and making a big difference to UKNOF over the past few years.

We have attempted to also get some fresh blood into the UKIF Board, and are grateful to Lou Ashtonhurst and Alex Bloor for their time spent, insights, and contributions as Directors. Unfortunately during 2023 they were unable to continue on the Board for reasons of their own and had to step down. UKIF is currently running with just 4 Board Directors, and while there have been discussions with potential candidates, it seems likely we will just wind up UKIF with the existing Board.

I've also had to deal with significant family issues over the past year, and regret and apologise these have diminished my UKNOF involvement, in particular preventing me at short notice from participating in both the 2022 Annual Meeting in January, and UKNOF52 in September. I would like to thank Denesh Bhabuta and Nigel Titley for covering for me at various points during the year on top of other demands on their time. I'm pleased to report I have now stepped back from my main executive role at DNS-OARC, and as my career moves to a non-executive "encore" phase, I'm now in a good position to facilitate the transition of UKNOF's resources to the successor entity, and then get out of everyone's way.

## Programme Committee

We started the year with 12 PC members and finished with 16, this has taken the pressure off of members and now we're in a comfortable position. 5 new PC member appointments were appointed in August:

- Harry Cross
- Joshua Levett
- Matt Jepp
- Paul Dunbar
- Paulius Judickas

We currently have no open positions in the PC and no major skills gaps.

The role of PC chair has been devolved into multiple smaller roles, in order to spread the work load more evenly among PC members, and to keep the time commitment down for new PC members. This is now being shared between Dave Wilson and Anne Johnson for PC administration, and James Bensley and Matt Jepp for event content production.

A [Charter for the PC](#) was approved in March.

Overall the PC provided good content for 2023 (83% positive reviews for UKNOF51 and 86% positive reviews for UKNOF52). The ratio of remote-to-in-person participation for both speakers and attendees has continued to drop. Remote presentations continue to be difficult to operate and we need to consider if we want to continue offering them. Switching the video streaming to YouTube seems to have resolved the outstanding quality issues we had with Zoom. The PC is now in a holding pattern awaiting an update on the future of UKNOF & UKIF.

# Communications Committee

Both London and Manchester UKNOF51 and 52 events were promoted on the UKNOF website, mailing list and social media which was also used to broadcast info about talks taking place at the events.

Steve Karameinsky took over the role of Communications Committee chair for 2023. Thanks go to Cathy Almond and Leo Vegoda who both left the committee last year.

The CC will remain in operation until UKIF winds up and UKNOF moves to whatever comes next and will continue to disseminate any required information via all channels.

Hopefully the recommendations made by the committee to the Board will be taken up by the new entity moving forward.

## Financial Position

While our 2023 meetings were successful, they ran at a deficit. Costs for venue, catering and services for both events were around the same at £18k each. Total income from sponsorship, registrations and patronage was around £37k. This was not however sufficient to cover UKNOF's overall event and service running costs, which at £56k for the year led to a deficit of £19k.

This leaves us with just £16.5k bank balance and net assets of just under £8k. Unfortunately the nature of making forward commitments to venues for future meetings is such that this balance is insufficient to make bookings without being at risk of trading insolvently. This is behind our decision to pause events after UKNOF52, and to seek a new home for UKNOF activities.

Our remaining balance is being set aside to keep our online platforms running until a new home can be found for them.

There remain further known contractor liabilities of about £20k - we hope to be able to offset these against some intangible assets which we are in the process of valuing. Once UKNOF community assets have been passed on, the plan is to wind-up UKIF Ltd on a cash and balance-neutral basis later in 2024.

## The Sustainability Problem

Many of the challenges facing UKNOF in recent years are due to structural externalities in our industry as a whole. It's worth looking at these a bit to try and understand what's become so difficult, and to help any future UK Network Operators organisation navigate them in future.

UKNOF has never been a wealthy organisation, and we've always tried to run it on a lean basis. For most of the 20-teens we were able to fund activities almost entirely from vendor sponsorships, including to the extent of free registrations for all attendees at fully-catered events in professional paid-for venues. Raising sponsorship funds required sales and finance leg-work, but again there was sufficient to pay for the time of people to do this, run our online platforms, and manage the event logistics and accountability that don't fall easily to volunteers.

As the decade progressed, however, the sponsor money became harder to get, with more exacting demands from vendors, and other events competing for the same funding sources. At this point we made a strategic decision to diversify funding sources, including annual patronage, making it easier to donate, and introducing registration fees to partly offset the per-delegate costs of events. These had varying degrees of success.

This was the situation we found ourselves entering the pandemic. While many Internet industry companies thrived during the huge switch to working and living online, for organisations like UKNOF and other NOGs whose revenue comes almost entirely from events, this was a very difficult time. We successfully made a pivot to online and then hybrid events and platforms, but it was difficult to generate revenue from these. We were also bound to long-standing venue contract commitments which eventually had to be fulfilled once things returned to the new normal.

All of this depleted our financial operating buffer, making UKNOF's existence even more hand-to-mouth than we had become accustomed to. We also found ourselves in a landscape much more challenging than the "Before Times":

- In-person attendance levels at events across the industry as low as half pre-pandemic levels.
- Greater complexity of participation support for hybrid events.
- A post-pandemic, post-brexit economy in the UK very much less vital than it had been previously.
- A professional development culture unique to the UK IT industry of being at least un-supportive, at worst actively hostile, to covering time and expenses for attending conferences, not least attendee registration fees commonplace elsewhere.
- Reduced vendor sponsorship budgets with more exacting demands on demonstrable commercial returns.
- A lower level of volunteer engagement and commitment across the entire nonprofit Internet industry sector.
- Higher venue and meeting services costs.
- Lack of volunteers willing and/or able to undertake the everyday business and fiduciary roles needed to support our activities.

We nonetheless managed to run some successful hybrid and in-person events during 2022-23, but all of the above have taken their toll. UKIF's Directors have a duty to not run a potentially insolvent, unviable business. The time has thus sadly come to call it a day, and give others a chance to come up with an approach which may do better in this new landscape.

## Community Resources

The real value in an organisation like UKNOF is in its community: all the contributions these community members make, and the various fora and platforms, physical and virtual, that facilitate all this community interaction. Any legal entities, governance structures, infrastructure, and money in the bank, are purely there as a means to the end of supporting the community and its activities. This is recognised in the original Mem & Arts of UKIF Ltd, and the original [UKNOF Charter](#). The Board is very mindful that we are only stewards of these resources for the wider community.

Over the past nearly 2 decades, we have built up quite a body of content and other resources that are clearly of value to the community, including:

- An archive of talks on best operational practice, in both slide deck (Indico) and video (Youtube) form
- Various community collaboration platforms including E-mail (mailman), Chat (IRC, Mattermost), and Zoom.
- Websites (Wordpress, Wiki, URL shortener)
- Resources that facilitate event-running, including a talk submissions evaluation process (indico), internal meetings (etherpad, GDrive), policy and process documents.
- A database of and relationships with many loyal and potential sponsors and patrons.
- Social media channels and groups
- A collection of uknof.\* domains to support all the above
- Donated equipment to support webcasts and network at events

It seems clear it would be in the community interest for these resources to have a future beyond UKIF's stewardship, at the very least in archive form and perhaps as ongoing platforms and tools.

## Handover Plans

While the UKIF Board no longer sees a role for itself in UKNOF's long-term future, we want something similar to continue to fulfill UKNOF's role in the community, and wish to do our best to enable that. At this point, our duty is to oversee a clean wind-up of UKIF's affairs, finances and resources, and to do what we can to ensure UKNOF's community resources continue in a new home, or at least preserved in archive form for posterity.

To this end we have invited those behind an initiative to create a successor entity to speak at the annual meeting, and we hope, with the community's support, to facilitate passing the torch to them.

Until this wind-up and transition is complete, we are ensuring that there will be sufficient funds and assistance to run UKNOF's existing online platforms as-is until end 2024.

We do however have a duty to ensure any community resources passed on go to an appropriate place, in-line with the public principles set out in UKNOF's Charter and the UKIF Mem and Arts. There is also a possibility of needing to fairly decide which of multiple potential successor initiatives may be the most appropriate to hand-over any such resources to.

To that end, we have drafted a set of simple guiding principles that will be considered before passing on any community resources:

- Community consensus support
- Stated Public Benefit and/or Not for Profit mission
- OPEN, inclusive participation
- Knowledge sharing, educational
- Focussed upon, but not limited to, infrastructure and operations
- Transparent, Neutral governance, accountable to and representative of the UK community
- Supportive of diversity and equality
- Respecting participant privacy

This list is neither required nor exhaustive, just guidance - we are very clear it is not for UKIF to dictate the detailed implementation of any successor, that is very much for the community to build consensus on with those behind the new initiative, which we wish well.

## Thank You and Goodbye !

It's over 20 years since I first thought that something like UKNOF would be a good idea, and nearly 19 since the first of our 50+ meetings in that time. While UKNOF has never had a mission to run infrastructure, I like to think we have made a difference in that time, through knowledge shared, relationships and friendships created and nurtured, ideas and projects realised, business transacted, careers developed, beers drunk.

Many, many people have been involved in and contributed to UKNOF in this time: volunteers, speakers, committee chairs, directors, contractors, suppliers, venues, sponsors, attendees, guests. Far more than I could possibly ever properly acknowledge. It was a huge pleasure and a lot of fun to meet, spend time with, and work with all of you and you have my undying gratitude. Please everyone give yourselves credit for this accomplishment. I have no plans to be a stranger, and will be looking on at what comes next with pride in what we achieved together.

*Keith Mitchell  
UKIF Managing Director  
January 2024*