

FSSE 2021

Trustees' Annual Report

2021 was a very unusual year for FSSE but in many ways showed the organisation at its most dedicated, creative and collaborative. 2020, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, had seen us take the necessary collective decision that FSSE's events would not run as in-person events. Junior Gathering for 11-14 year olds did not run, and Senior Conference for 15-18 year olds ran as remote, technology-enabled event over the course of a shorter week than previously. The continued uncertainty around lockdown restrictions and social distancing left a certain amount of uncertainty around whether one or both events could run in-person this year.

To try and keep abreast of changing circumstances, and to forward-plan for their implications where possible, FSSE's event coordinators, trustees and officers met on a fortnightly basis in the six months leading to the event. Although prompted by the unique circumstances of 2021, this proved a very useful way of keeping in touch with each other, and for everyone involved to understand the tasks involved in running the events and the timescales required to achieve them, and to ensure all had the chance to express their ideas or any concerns. It is to be hoped that this style of working can be continued for future years, in some form.

We took on board feedback from FSSE stakeholders (participants, adult volunteers, parents and guardians) and made the decision that both Junior Gathering and Senior Conference should run as fully in-person events this year. We did so in full awareness of the risks involved, and planned mitigations where possible, at a time where many similar organisations, faced with this decision, had decided that their own events could not run safely. It would have been understandable if FSSE had come to the same conclusion; the arrangements teams' ability, willingness and commitment to the events and participants is inspiring. With careful planning, and appropriate additional health and safety measures such as the enabling of COVID 19 testing for all participants, no mid-week coach trips to Oxford and self-isolation for people who appeared to have developed COVID-19 symptoms, the events not only ran, but ran successfully. There being no positive test results was one indication of this; the overwhelmingly positive feedback received from participants, who had missed the in-person nature of the events and the grounding they give to their lives, was another.

Trustees are similarly confident that FSSE remains on a sure financial footing. With fewer transactions and decreased costs in 2021 – not least the savings made from the shift to Zoom-based planning meetings – we were able to save money, and are grateful for the large and small donations we receive to continue our work. We know many AMs and LMs support our participants, their families, and FSSE finances through part funding of participant places, and are glad that this approach continues so robustly.

We worked hard to make our events open to everyone, regardless of means. In previous years this has included helping participants with difficulties find bursary funding locally where possible, and where not possible, providing bursary funding from FSSE's own limited funds. Although we had fewer bursary requests this year than in previous years, we remain

committed to ensuring no participants are excluded for financial reasons, and are pleased that our financial model allows us to do this.

We pay careful attention to the safety of our events, with designated trained safeguarding team members. We carefully assess possible risks so that we mitigate them, or are prepared should we have an emergency.

Being able to run both our events as fully in-person gatherings this year means we anticipate this pattern will continue for the future. We have learned, especially over the last 18 months, to be flexible to changing circumstances; regardless of what form future events take, we will continue to focus on increasing our participant numbers, as well as taking time over the next few years to scope out potential options for how we can meet the needs of our young people through the format of the events we run.

This year has demonstrated once again that FSSE's events are managed by skilled, conscientious, committed and courageous teams. External circumstances, and changing legal requirements, meant this has not always been a straightforward process, but FSSE has been able to thrive in these conditions. The sense of joy and inspiration FSSE events bring seems, in many ways, to have been heightened in 2021, and it remains a privilege to be connected to this organisation, its events and the people who contribute to them.

Thank you.

James Barnard – Clerk to FSSE trustees