

# Allison Winton: A personal Reflection on nearly 40 years at the RMS

**It hardly seems possible, but RMS Chief Executive Allison Winton is retiring after more than 39 years of service at the Society. For so long the ‘face’ of the RMS, and having worked in numerous different roles over the decades, Allison has an unparalleled working knowledge of the Society, its achievements, and the personalities that have driven it forward throughout its recent history.**

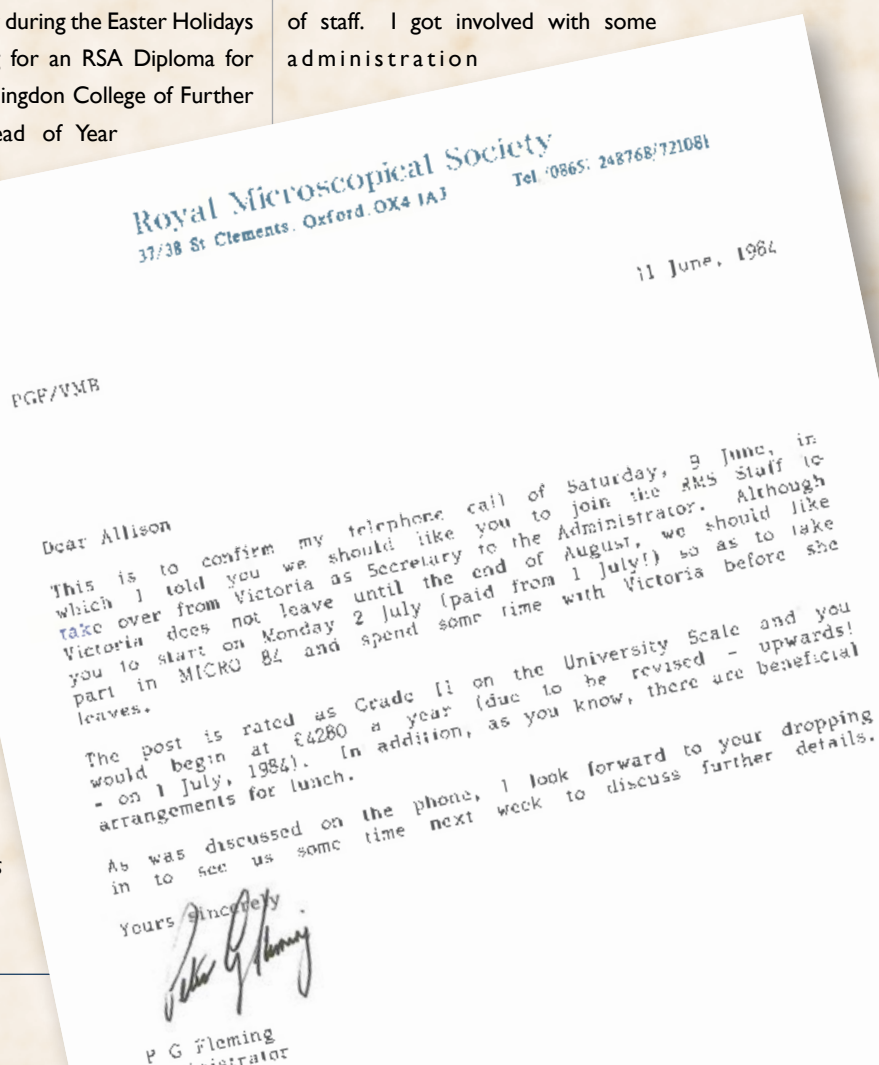
## **Here she reflects on her remarkable career:**

My RMS story starts with two weeks of work experience at the Society during the Easter Holidays in 1984. I was studying for an RSA Diploma for Personal Assistants at Abingdon College of Further Education, and the Head of Year suggested that I

was exactly the ‘sort of person’ that would fit in well at the RMS (as Karen Collins was the following year!). I arrived at the St Clements offices with the scruffy red door, and was introduced to Colonel Fleming and Ben the elderly Old

English sheepdog, Judy Lewis and other members of staff. I got involved with some administration

*Job offer letter 1984: Allison still has the original copy of the job offer letter she received from RMS Administrator Colonel Fleming in 1984.*





*Just a week after joining the RMS in 1984, Allison (second left) is pictured here at the MICRO event of that year in London, with RMS colleagues including the Administrator, Colonel Fleming, in the foreground. Allison's duties included serving drinks at the evening receptions - hence the bottle of wine!*

tasks, and helped out at registration for the Microscopy of Catalysis Meeting which I think took place at the Department of Engineering at the University of Oxford, organised by Ed Boyes. I must have done okay during my work experience, because there was a vacancy for 'Secretary to the Administrator' and I was asked if I would like that role, subject to the agreement of the Executive Honorary Secretary, Gillian Bullock.

My first proper day was 1 July 1984, the week before MICRO 84, which was held at the Bloomsbury Crest Hotel and the School of Pharmacy in London. In the office there were no computers, emails or faxes, just electric typewriters! We were fully reliant on the post, of which we had two deliveries a day. I was told that on opening the post, never have your legs under the desk, in case of any letter or parcel bombs being sent to the RMS! The committee structure was very similar to how it is now, though the Flow Cytometry, AFM & SPM, DAIM and Early Career committees did not exist. The committee members all looked much older than they do now, but that may just be because I was so young then! We ran a full programme of events, the LM and EM Schools and other courses and conferences, plus a five-day MICRO Conference and Exhibition every other year.

Over the next few years, my knowledge of the Society grew, and I also became involved in the advertising, and assisting Peter Evennett with the production, of the Proceedings. Back in 1984 there were just eight full-time members of staff, plus a part-time bookkeeper. The office environment was much more formal then, with set routines – start at 9 am, coffee at 11 am, lunch at 1 pm, tea at 3 pm, and depart at 5 pm, and all instructions for events were written like military plans! We always referred to Colonel Fleming as Colonel Fleming, and Mr Baker, the retired bank manager who only worked on Wednesday, referred to each other in this formal style too. Colonel Fleming was very protective and supportive of all the staff in the office, and all members of RMS staff knew that if we ever needed help with anything he would be there for us.

In July 1988, just before the EUREM 88 event in York, Colonel Fleming left the Society. It was quite a tumultuous time for the Society, which led to contested elections to Council later that year. During this time, Kate Wooding (nee Wellby) and Dawn Hopkins (nee Hague) both left the Society to further their careers, only to return in 2015 to cover periods of maternity leave, and they are still working at the Society to this day. Judy, Karen and I kept the Society running from July to November 1988.

I was promoted to Exhibition Organiser in the





*Allison with Karen Collins - who retired at the end of 2016 - and, right, Dawn Hopkins (current Exhibition Manager, after returning to the RMS in 2015) in a photo from 1988.*

summer of 1988, and involved in the final stages of the EUREM 88 Exhibition at the University of York. This was a baptism of fire with an exhibition in a marquee on scaffolding, constructed over steps next

to the lake! To this day I remember hiring in heaters to dry the air in the exhibition after a particularly wet and windy typical August bank holiday weekend, to hopefully make it a better and less damp environment for setting up the microscopes. The walls of the marquee flapped in the wind, and the floor was a temporary structure made up of bouncy floorboards – a real challenge for setting up SEMs! For those who required liquid nitrogen, we just wheeled cannisters round the lake to the



*Micro '94 held in West London was one of many major events Allison helped to organise over the years. She is pictured here, catching up with Agnes Murphy of Microscopy and Analysis.*



*Allison pictured at the RMS Council Dinner, Christmas 1995.*

exhibition on sack trolleys – health and safety would not be impressed now! EUREM 88 was a very busy event with all accommodation in the colleges on campus, and a concert at the Minster followed by a reception at the racecourse. Prior to the event, on the abstract deadline date, we had four sacks of post delivered, which all contained abstracts in hard backed envelopes, which took about two days to open and catalogue! The congress dinner (to which the RMS staff were invited as guests) was at Castle Howard – this consisted of a very slow walk in a queue through various rooms, with drinks given to you in each room, but no food until the very end room! I do remember having to wake some attendees up who had fallen asleep in various places around the venue, just so that they could get the buses back to the University!

During the Autumn of 1988, although I was now working on the exhibitions and Proceedings advertising, I still attended all the committee meetings and took minutes. This gave me a good overall view of how the Society operated, which has been really useful to this day. A review into how the RMS was run was conducted by our auditors

at that time. They didn't really have anything to add other than suggesting that the office needn't be in Oxford, but could be anywhere in the UK! At the end of 1988, Paul Hirst was appointed as the new Administrator, and he used to refer to me as the "fount of all knowledge"! We were then busy working on the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Society - we were also involved in the organisation of a six-month exhibition at the Science Museum in London (we ran a number of evening receptions where we used to serve cheese and chicken legs, and wine, of course, which Brian Bracegirdle used to buy earlier in the day and store in his office until we arrived!), a two-day meeting at the Royal Institution, followed by EMAG-MICRO 89 at the Royal National Hotel in Bloomsbury, with the conference sessions across the road at the Institute of Child Health. The Conference Dinner was at The Brewery in East London. The EMAG-MICRO exhibition was 'an experience', being situated in two large rooms, a marquee and along numerous corridors at the



*Allison demonstrates her karaoke credentials during the 2006 trip to Sapporo, Japan, where the RMS narrowly lost out in a bid to host the 2010 International Microscopy Congress (IMC) in London.*

Royal National Hotel, very unlike the professional exhibition venues we use for mmc nowadays. The organisation of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary year was an amazing experience to be involved in, and it was good to witness the Royal Mail RMS postage stamps being launched, as well as seeing Peter Evennett and





*emc2012 was the first big RMS event to be held at Manchester Central. Allison is pictured here in the staffroom, directing proceedings alongside Karen Collins.*

Dick Paden on the TV programme *Blue Peter* with microscopes on display. Producing the souvenir catalogue of the Science Museum Exhibition was a challenge, but fun too, with almost daily phone calls with Peter Evennett, and some of those at 7am in the morning in the office, when he was on holiday in Norway with his family. Soon after this we had our very first fax machine! It was very exciting to be able to fax a proof to someone in say, Australia, and have a reply on my return to the office the next day!

I was then involved in the organisation of MICROs at a variety of London hotels between 1990 – 2000. The Bloomsbury Crest Hotel was no longer suitable, so we tried the London West Hotel in Lillie Road as well as the Novotel in Hammersmith. I was talking about the Novotel experience with a number of exhibitors at mmc2023, and we all remembered it being like a multi-storey car park, with enormous pillars! I remember one year turning up to find that they had done some building work between me selling exhibition space and the day of the event. When one exhibitor was due to arrive to set up their stand, we had discovered that it was no longer possible to put their stand there, as the hotel had done some building work, reducing this area of exhibition space! We managed to find a solution

which the exhibitor was happy with, but that wasn't a great experience to start the exhibition build with. During my time as Exhibition Organiser I worked very hard at developing a good working relationship with all the exhibiting companies, and understanding their needs and requirements. The Corporate Advisory Board (formerly the Trade Advisory Committee) was a great place to develop this relationship. I also started to attend other exhibitions as an exhibitor, which gave me a good insight into what it's like to be an exhibitor too – e.g. 15 minutes for exhibition time during a one-day meeting should definitely NOT be done!

The Novotel in Hammersmith was becoming too small for MICRO, and at MICRO 2000 we had a waiting list of approximately 20 companies! It was time to find a new venue, and I was very much involved in the planning and move to ExCeL for the first MicroScience event in 2002. MicroScience was a new name, but still keeping the MICRO. We went for a new layout, having the exhibition in a diamond layout – this worked in that you nearly always walked different ways through the exhibition, but many people complained about getting lost! Moving to ExCeL brought us many new challenges; we had to order and pay for so many more things than we had at the London hotels, e.g. carpets in the exhibition, but this was a really exciting project to be involved with.

Paul retired in 2005, as did Judy Lewis (then Deputy Administrator) and Rob Flavin was recruited as the Executive Director. Rob came to the Society with many fresh and new ideas, and made many changes to the fabric of the office building. He and I went to Sapporo in September in 2006 to assist Debbie Stokes and John Hutchison with the bid to run the International Microscopy Congress (IMC) at ExCeL in September 2010. We were unlucky and came second to Brazil, but it was a tremendous opportunity to visit Japan and see an International Congress in action. We had some fun socially too,

joining Rod Shipley (then at FEI) at crab restaurants, and going out with Pete Lander (then at JEOL) and others to a beer party followed by a karaoke evening – those who were there will remember it well, and I still have the photos!! Following on from going to IMC in 2006, I started to go to many other international meetings, and these included many M&M meetings in the US, Neuroscience in the US, EMC in Aachen and Lyon and IMC in Prague and Sydney. Such great opportunities to meet current and potential new members and exhibitors, and of course to fly the flag for the RMS - we are an



Allison is joined by former RMS Exhibitions Manager Chloe Goode at M&M 2014 in Connecticut, USA.





Allison travelling in style with Chloe Goode at IMC in Prague, 2014.

International Society! 2007 was also our first involvement in the elmi meeting, which we ran in York with Peter O'Toole. Elmi is a very different event for us and finding workshop rooms is a challenge, but a good one! Since then we have organised elmi in Leuven and Dublin, a virtual elmi in 2022, and the RMS will be organising the 2024 elmi in Liverpool.

Rob left the Society in 2009 and started his own promotion company, CooperRepCo, and continued working with the Society. I was then promoted to Event Director, attending all committees and overseeing all RMS Events, with Karen Collins becoming the Administrator, and we were a great team, working together on overseeing the various aspects of the Society.

Our next challenge was emc2012! During emc2008 in Aachen, we had successfully won the bid to host emc2012, on behalf of the European Microscopy Society (EMS), in London in September 2012. We



Allison chatting with Peter Wilson from Integrated Dynamics Engineering at the IMC Congress in Sydney, Australia in 2018.

had originally thought it would be great to follow on after the Olympics, but unfortunately the Olympics had tenancy agreements in place for all London venues until the end of September 2012, with no flexibility, even though the venues would not be used for our dates as the Olympics would be over by then. This started us on a mission to find an alternative venue, and I contacted all potential venues around the UK. Manchester Central could offer us the dates we needed, and on paper, it looked like they could offer us the space we needed as well. So Karen and I, accompanied

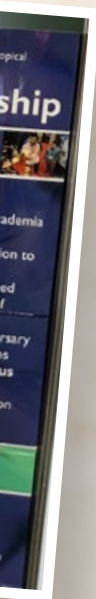
by Les Stump (the Honorary Treasurer) visited the venue and realised that it could be ideal! We then visited again with Debbie Stokes (emc2012 Chair) and representatives of the EMS, who all agreed. The whole office team then organised the whole of the emc2012 congress in Manchester, with the Congress Banquet at Manchester United, Old Trafford. It was an amazing event to be involved in, and to see it all run so successfully. I was in Manchester for 10 days before, during and at emc2012, and managed just four hours of sleep each night, as the adrenaline and stress involved in such a large event kept me awake. It was all worth it though!

After emc2012 had taken place, we realised that ExCeL didn't really provide us with suitable lecture theatres close enough to the exhibition, and we realised that this was something we had at Manchester Central. After Council and CAB approval of moving to Manchester Central, we moved mmc (a new name from Microscience, but short for Microscience Microscopy Congress) to Manchester for mmc2014. This went well, and we then had further discussions about moving our congress to 'odd' years to avoid the EMC and IMC International Congresses, and talked to EMAG about joining us at mmc – this was all agreed, and the first mmc incorporating EMAG took place in Manchester in 2015. This then started the pattern of mmc every other year, during 'odd' years, and the successful organisation of mmc2017 and mmc2019. We've had many experiences at the Manchester event, with the staff at the venue being really helpful and friendly. I only had one instance where I had to complain and that was during the mmc2017 exhibition breakdown, where traffic would not let any of the exhibitors through to the loading bay when the exhibition closed. I went out to find out what was happening, and was told that traffic were waiting to hear from the organisers that they could let people through – that was the only time that I said in a firm voice, "I **am** the organiser – let them through!"

During 2016 Karen (Collins) decided to take early

retirement at the end of the year. I had discussions with Karen and members of the Executive Committee, and after giving a presentation to the Executive Committee with my thoughts and plans for the future, I was promoted to the position of Chief Executive from 1 January 2017. I really missed working with Karen, but fortunately Tor (Masters) and Adam (Clay) were appointed as Event and Finance Directors at the beginning of 2017, and we have developed excellent working relationships of support, bouncing ideas of each other, and delivering the very best we can for the Society. The first two years of being Chief Executive went well, with much of this time focussed on being the Professional Congress Organiser (PCO) for emc2020 in Copenhagen. This was a very busy time as we still had mmc2019 taking place, and we took on two additional members of staff to work solely on emc2020. All was looking great, with all plans coming together, and we held an exhibitor site visit at the Bella Center in Copenhagen in February 2020. We were hearing about Covid at that time, but were still planning with Klaus Qvortrup and the rest of the organising committee, for emc2020 to go ahead in August 2020. Then Covid started to affect us all.....

During the first national UK Lockdown, we went from being in the office on the Monday to everyone working remotely from the Wednesday. Fortunately, all our IT could handle this, and we just changed our working patterns to suit, with lots of Teams meetings etc. We were still hopeful that emc2020 would be able to go ahead, but were starting to worry that we would not get the attendance needed...We were unable to cancel the event because of the financial implications, but fortunately the Danish government decreed that no event with more than 1,000 people could take place until the September, so our financial loss was less than it could have been. It was so disappointing for everyone concerned, but we had no option. We did, however, run a virtual emc2020 student congress in the November which was well received. Early on in the pandemic we







*Allison receiving the RMS Winton Prize, named in honour of her years of dedicated service to the Society. She is pictured with former RMS President Grace Burke.*

realised that we would not be able to run any in-person events or committee meetings, and swiftly moved forward with Zoom committee meetings, as well as developing various online meetings, and ways of communication and keeping the community together. I would like to thank both Tor and Adam for developing these virtual meetings so well. During the height of the pandemic most of the RMS Staff were furloughed, and during this time, just Tor, Adam, Jill and I continued working. It was a strange time indeed, but great to develop the virtual meetings, which we continue to this day, but now we run a mix of different types of meetings – in-person, virtual and hybrid.

There was a gradual return to working in the office but there is more working from home now, as we all realise the benefits of not sitting in heavy traffic every day! We do still like to be in the office though, working with the rest of the brilliant RMS Team!

During my time at the RMS I have seen many changes in technology! As I mentioned earlier, when I first

started working for the Society, we all had electric typewriters, making three carbon copies of all typed correspondence (peach for the alphabetical file, white for the date file and green for the event file). Badges were made using a machine where we had to turn a wheel to print each letter of someone's name and affiliation (not quite the mail merges we have today) which was very time consuming. These names then had to have the back bit pulled off and the name stuck on a paper badge, taking care to attach names in a straight line! Bas Ploem became involved with our first foray into computers, helping us to develop Lex, the first RMS Database. Bas spent many hours in the office, and always worked to the wire to get as much done before walking along St Clements to the bus stop to catch the bus to the airport! He did miss the bus a couple of times. Karen and I spent a very enjoyable week in Leiden, working in the University in the mornings finding out more about Lex, and then exploring The Netherlands in the afternoons – a great experience. Our very first email address was accessed on just the one computer in the office, with an address as part of Oxford University. We had to switch it on and dial up each time, and if we received an email we

were unable to forward it to anyone in the office to deal with and were unable to print it, so we used to write down what the email said by hand, and then pass the piece of paper over to the appropriate member of staff! Incredible to think that is what happened then!! The move to us all having our own laptops was an excellent development, as this meant we all still have access at events and at home.

The growth of Outreach activities has been great to see. The 'A Microscope For Every School (AMFES) Scheme' which was introduced in the early 1990s, where the Society raised some money so that we could provide a partial refund for up to two recommended microscopes purchased for UK primary schools is still running today. The biggest change and development was the introduction of the Microscope Activity Kits, which were the brainchild of Susan Anderson, who led the development of these. This scheme has been absolutely amazing, and I'm so pleased at how successful the scheme has been and continues to be. Back in the early 1990s I spent some time travelling around the UK visiting various Science Centres and Museums, some of which was with Peter Evennett and Chris Hammond. We were trying to find a new home for the Buxton Micrarium displays, as the town council of Buxton wanted its pump room back.... Unfortunately we were unsuccessful finding a new home, but it was really interesting seeing what was available in the various museums. The Tabletop SEM Scheme, masterminded by Alex Ball and James Perkins (with Hitachi, IRIS and the NHM) has been an amazing scheme going out to many schools in the UK. I really hope that they are successful in obtaining funding to move this forward.

I am writing this after having the most successful mmc (and EMAG) in Manchester, since we organised the first congress there in 2014. We had more conference delegates and exhibition visitors attending, and there was a real 'buzz' at the whole event. I was especially touched and surprised to be awarded the very first Winton Award, and for once I was totally speechless, as well as fighting back the

emotional happy tears! Looking back at my years at the Society, I feel incredibly lucky to have worked with so many amazing people on so many things. When I took over the post of Chief Executive I said that I am the 'caretaker' of the Society, and that the Society will long outlive me! I wish my successor Sali Davis, every best wish for the future, and I hope that she will enjoy working for the Society as much as I have – it is such a special organisation.

I would like to thank the following ex-members of staff, and there are many more too (sorry to anyone I have missed):

Colonel Fleming, Judy Lewis, Karen Collins, Rob Flavin, Susan Robertson, Rachel Holborrow (nee Knibb), Liz Howe, Chloe Goode, Mel Reedman, Zu Dragnevskia and Amanda Jarman.

I would particularly like to thank the current RMS staff team of Tor Masters, Adam Clay, Jade Sturdy, Dawn Hopkins, Kate Wooding, Debbie Hunt, Tracey Clay, Lucy Ridler, Owen Morton, Jill Hobbs, Georgina Fletcher, Katie Reynolds, Nick Cameron, Jess Cole and Alessandra Reni – for making the RMS such a great place to work at on a day-to-day basis – the current team is the best team ever and I'll miss you all!

Over the years I have worked with some amazing members and committee members, and to name some who I would particularly like to thank over very many years – Peter Evennett, Chris Hammond, John Hutchison, Chris Kennedy, Les Stump, Jeremy Sanderson, Phil Robinson, Gillian Bullock, Lynne Joyce, Debbie Stokes, Tony Wilson, Mark Rainforth, Pete Nellist, Dick Paden, Susan Brooks and Ron Van Noorden, and those no longer with us – Savile Bradbury, Brian Bracegirdle, Nick Wrigley, Don Thomson, Nick Read, and, of course, Chris Hawes. You have all had such an impact on me.

I would like to thank all current members of Council, the Sections, FIGs, History Committee, the Corporate Advisory Board, and especially our current Executive Committee, who put so much of their own time into the Society. They will do a



great job at guiding the Society through the next few years - thank you Pete, Grace, Rik, Michelle, Rod, Maddy, Andy, Kerry and Susan.

The RMS is in a great place for the future, and will continue to grow despite the challenges of Open Access. I wish everyone involved with the Society all the very best for the future – such a special and

unique Society, and I feel privileged to have spent nearly 40 years working here.

Finally, I would like to thank my Mum and Dad for being there for me and for supporting me throughout my RMS career, my daughter Lauren (who feels like the RMS is part of her extended family), and of course, my partner Gary and his family. I am so lucky to have you all in my life.

## Allison's RMS career in numbers, and other fun facts:

During Allison's **39** years at the Society, she has:

worked with **18** RMS Presidents

worked with **6** Honorary Treasurers (one of whom twice, as Lynne Joyce had two terms in office)

worked with **6** Executive Honorary Secretaries

Been involved in the organisation of: **8** MICROS

**1** Industrial and BioMedical MICRO in 1987

**3** EUREM/EMC meetings (York, Manchester and almost Copenhagen), though EMC2020 was cancelled a few months before because of Covid

**1** EMAG/MICRO in 1989

**5** MicroSciences

**6** mmc congresses (**5** with EMAG)

Seen the publication of **468** issues of the *Journal of Microscopy* and **168** issues of the RMS Members' Magazine, covering its transformation from the 'Proceeding of the RMS' into **infocus** in 2006, and then its recent transition to an online publication.

- The RMS staff mmc uniform is one thing that hasn't changed much during Allison's career! She says: "At MICROS in the 1980s, our uniforms consisted of men's striped blue and white shirts from M&S, which then changed to the current Boden stripy tops. The only time we diverted away from stripes was at emc2012, when we wore something 'red'!"
- Allison has very little formal scientific education. She says: "I only gained grade C

in my Chemistry and Physics O Levels! I've learnt so much while at the RMS though, and wish that I had been enthused in science while at school. This is one of the reasons why I think the RMS Outreach Programme is so important."

- Finally, Allison has very many RMS 'stories' from over the years, none of which, she tells us, "can possibly be put into print!"



Allison (back, centre) joins the rest of the RMS team for a group photo in the Manchester Central foyer at mmc2023.



Allison strikes a colourful pose with Jade Sturdy (PA to the Chief Executive) during the exhibition 'build' ahead of mmc2023.