

## RAS Astronomy Forum

A meeting of the RAS Astronomy Forum was held at 2pm on 17 February 2026 (online, MS Teams).

### Present

Robert Massey (Chair), Marieta Valdivia Lefort, Ian Russell, Hendrik Van Eerten, Alastair Edge, Mahesh Anand, Nial Tanvir, Daniel Stephen Brown, Alan Heavens, Nick Wright, Jim Wild, Cathie Clarke, Vik Dhillon, Mark Thompson, Lyndsay Fletcher, Nina Hatch, Dominic Bowman, Sara Russell, Danny Steeghs, Rowan Smith, Catherine Heymans, Mark Sullivan, Poshak Gandhi, Ulrich Kolb, Ken Rice, Ashley King, Mark Wyatt, Malcolm Bremer, Aprajita Verma, Andrzej Fludra, Martin Hardcastle, Stephen Smartt, Mat Page, James Urquhart, Stephen Wilkins, Keith Grainge, Mike Lockwood, Paul Clark, David Murphy, Jenny Hiscock, Kim Burchell, Grahame Blair, Chris Woolford, Jessica Atkinson, Jake Gilmore.

### Background

The meeting was convened to hear an update on the STFC budget and prioritisation process, discuss the implications for astronomy, and agree on immediate actions for the community. In particular, it aimed to provide a clearer understanding of how the sector can navigate the current crisis without losing a generation of talent, especially early-career researchers and technical staff; what the recovery plan is and how long the present funding pressures are expected to continue; how to build a stronger evidence base for impact, particularly around the transfer of astronomy-trained skills into innovation, wealth creation, and the wider economy, including anecdotal evidence that could later be consolidated into more robust data; and what practical steps should be taken next

#### 1 STFC update on budgets and prioritisation (summary)

Grahame Blair (STFC) gave an update on the STFC budget process, including the following points:

## **1.1 UKRI funding context and “bucket” structure**

- 1.1.1 UKRI has moved to a revised funding model aligned to national priorities, structured into broad “buckets” (including curiosity-driven research and enabling/strengthening UK R&D).
- 1.1.2 STFC is operating within this framework and must manage within the allocations received.
- 1.1.3 GB stressed that some tensions that used to sit “within STFC” now sit at a UKRI-level bucket allocation discussion.

## **1.2 Drivers of pressure**

- 1.2.1 Inflationary pressures (energy, build costs, overheads) and prior commitments were cited as major contributors.
- 1.2.2 STFC’s PPAN programme was described as needing to become sustainable under current funding constraints.
- 1.2.3 The framing presented was “do fewer things better” rather than uniform cuts.

## **1.3 Prioritisation exercise**

- 1.3.1 Science Board is leading a prioritisation exercise.
- 1.3.2 Community pro formas have been issued and are due by 10 March
- 1.3.3 Scenarios include significant reductions (e.g., 20/40/60% cut planning assumptions for projects).
- 1.3.4 STFC confirmed that earlier internal prioritisation work existed, but the current exercise is intended to be more nuanced and informed by direct input from collaborations/projects

## **1.4 Grants line / 2025 round**

- 1.4.1 STFC shared headline outcomes for the 2025 grants round: 3 large awards, supporting 20 applicants (headline success rate quoted ~33%); and 45 small awards, supporting 67 applicants (headline success rate quoted ~19%)
- 1.4.2 STFC noted that astronomy grant success rates are difficult to compare across councils because of demand management differences and scheme structures.

## **1.5 Grant start dates / profiling**

- 1.5.1 STFC reiterated that the delayed grant starts (6 months) were a “least worst” measure to smooth financial profiling.
- 1.5.2 There was acknowledgement of the negative impacts (staff waiting to start, departmental pressures, visa complications).
- 1.5.3 STFC indicated an intention to return to April start dates from the 2027 round onward.

## **1.6 Outlook**

- 1.6.1 STFC indicated 2-3 very difficult years ahead.
- 1.6.2 The prioritisation process is intended to stabilise the programme through to around 2029/30, after which some headroom may open up (subject to inflation and other factors).

## **2 Main questions and discussion with STFC**

### **2.1 Where exactly is the 30% cut coming from? This was the dominant line of questioning:**

- 2.1.1 Community members repeatedly asked for a clearer explanation of how a ~30% PPAN reduction is arising, whether this is due to UKRI bucket allocations, STFC

- internal pressures, facility costs, or a combination, and what degree of agency STFC has in protecting bucket 1 (curiosity-driven research) activities.
- 2.1.2 STFC staff present emphasised: the complexity of the profiling/allocation matrix, that the PPAN target is effectively about 70% of the 2024/25 level over the period, and that some tensions now sit at UKRI level via the bucket framework. However, attendees expressed continued concern that the explanation remained insufficiently transparent.
- 2.2 ***Grants line versus facilities/instrumentation.***
- 2.2.1 There was strong community feedback that the grants line has repeatedly been treated as the flexible line, and protecting grants has been a long-standing recommendation of AGP and advisory panels.
- 2.2.2 STFC acknowledged this concern but said the environment has changed because access to facilities increasingly depends on investment in instrumentation and subscriptions, and the trade-off is now more acute (e.g. risk of reduced access if instrument contributions are not made).
- 2.3 ***Success rates and messaging***
- 2.3.1 The Astronomy Grants Panel Chair noted: comparisons with other councils' success rates are misleading due to very different demand-management rules, and the current ~19% rate is the lowest in at least the available AGP historical record.
- 2.3.2 STFC agreed that comparisons require caveats and said the point was more about anticipating how such numbers may be used externally.
- 2.4 ***Studentships and pipeline***
- 2.4.1 A question was raised about whether reducing PhD studentship numbers had been considered, given worsening postdoc/faculty prospects.
- 2.4.2 STFC responded that this had been considered, Science Board and Council input supported maintaining studentships, and UKRI had also signalled a desire to maintain studentships. STFC stressed the argument for studentships should not be framed solely as an academic pipeline issue, but also as a broader national skills/economy contribution.
- 2.5 ***STFC internal savings context***
- 2.5.1 An STFC communications representative added that: the pressure is not confined to PPAN, STFC labs are also required to make substantial reductions over the next 3 years (quoted ~15% / ~£38m for labs, plus ~£25m in computing/technical/campus support), and voluntary exits were already taking place. This was offered as context rather than mitigation of astronomy impacts.
- 2.6 ***“Good news” rumours***
- 2.6.1 A participant asked whether “good news” reportedly coming from elsewhere would apply to astronomy. STFC’s response was that no concrete additional good news for astronomy was known at that stage.

### **3 Community-only discussion (after STFC attendees left)**

After STFC participants left, the remaining attendees discussed strategy, messaging, and next steps.

- 3.1 The group agreed there is still significant uncertainty about where exactly decisions were made, how knowingly this outcome was created, and therefore who best to lobby for change.
- 3.2 Consensus emerged on the need for careful messaging: Avoid sounding like a narrow special pleading campaign and publicly “villainising” named individuals/institutions; focus on astronomy as collateral damage in a restructuring, and on the broader public/national value (education, skills, innovation, economic impact, health of the wider physics ecosystem).
- 3.3 Attendees also discussed using a steady, sustained media approach (“continuous drip”) rather than one big push, and using Ian Chapman’s recent wording about consultation as a possible opening for further engagement.
- 3.4 A conversation with Michele Dougherty was suggested as a means of exploring senior-level opportunities for more effective collaboration.
- 3.5 There was support for broadening the advocacy base beyond astronomy. A suggestion was made to engage Heads of Physics (not only Heads of Astronomy) and to work via the IOP Heads of Department forum where possible. This was seen as potentially carrying more weight politically and institutionally.
- 3.6 It was noted that FOI requests had been submitted to obtain clearer information on funding flows and decisions. The intention stated was to publish responses on the relevant website when received.
- 3.7 A further meeting was proposed in the near term to review progress on actions, discuss the evolving situation, and continue planning on both immediate and longer-term issues (including structural questions and early-career protections).

### **4 Agreed/emerging actions (draft action log)**

#### **4.1 *Evidence and impact case***

- 4.1.1 All attendees/departments to provide examples (including anecdotal evidence) of astronomy-trained people moving into industry, startups, software, finance,

engineering, etc. to support a stronger public/political case on economic impact and skills transfer.

4.1.2 Evidence to be sent to the named coordinators (as referenced in the meeting).

4.1.3 This presents both opportunities and risks for the RAS.

#### 4.2 **Prioritisation process**

4.2.1 Project leads/collaborations to complete and submit STFC prioritisation pro formas by 10 March (including 20/40/60% scenario inputs where requested).

#### 4.3 **Communications and lobbying**

4.3.1 Community leads to continue coordinated lobbying efforts, with messaging focused on health of physics, UK skills pipeline, national capability, and economic/innovation impacts (not blame).

4.3.2 Media outreach to continue (using existing relationships where possible), with a sustained and carefully framed campaign.

4.3.3 Political engagement to continue, including outreach to relevant Select Committee members and ongoing follow-up to recent letters (including to Patrick Vallance).

#### 4.4 **Broader institutional support**

4.4.1 Forum/organisers to explore joint action with the IOP and Heads of Physics (via the IOP Heads of Department network), alongside astronomy-specific letters.

#### 4.5 **Transparency and information gathering**

4.5.1 Organisers to publish FOI responses when received and use them to inform subsequent advocacy and messaging.

### 5 **Close**

5.1 *The Chair closed by noting that the discussion had been constructive and generated useful new ideas. The group agreed on the importance of coordinated, sustained pressure while giving stakeholders time to respond. A follow-up meeting may be convened depending on developments.*

5.2 *Organisers to convene a follow-up meeting soon (timing to depend on developments), to review actions and refine strategy.*