MINUTES

Royal Astronomical Society

Council (December 2025)

A meeting of the RAS Council was held on Friday 12th December 2025 at the Royal Astronomical Society, Burlington House, London, and via Teams

Present:

Dr Alan Cayless (online)
Professor Paul Crowther
Professor Andrew Curtis
Mrs Karen Anne Devoil
Professor Stephen Eales (online; from item 6)
Dr Imogen Gingell
Professor Matthew Griffin
Professor James Hammond
Dr Iain Hannah (online)
Professor Mark Lester
Professor Mike Lockwood (Chair)
Professor Steve Miller
Dr Cyrielle Opitom
Dr Arvind Parmar
Dr Mike Peel
Professor Caroline Smith (online)
Dr Ashley Spindler (online)
Dr Sheona Urquhart
Professor Derek Ward-Thompson (online)
Professor Jim Wild
Dr Andrew Young

In attendance:

Dr Robert Massey, Deputy Executive Director
Mr Ian Russell, Executive Director

1 Welcome and apologies for absence

The President, Professor Mike Lockwood, as Chair of Council welcomed members to the meeting. Apologies had been received from Dr Chrysa Avdellidou and Mr Audie Muller.

2 Declarations of interest

Council noted the Conflicts of Interests register which been circulated with the meeting papers and Council members who had not yet shared their Conflict of Interest declarations were asked to do so at their earliest convenience.

ACTION: Council members to complete and return Conflicts of Interest declaration to Mr Russell at their earliest convenience if they have not already done so.

After discussion, Council agreed that Councillors' employers should be recorded on the register of interests.

ACTION: Mr Russell and Council members to add the employer(s) of Councillors to the register of interests.

Council members were invited to declare any additional interests relevant to the agenda should they arise.

3 Minutes of the meeting held on 10 October and matters arising

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2025 were approved.

All matters arising had been actioned or were in progress though Mr Russell noted that, despite its importance, the work to ensure greater clarity around the responsibilities for the National Astronomy Meeting had slipped due to other urgent priorities.

3.1 Support for the This is Geoscience campaign

Council discussed support for the Geological Society of London's (GSL) *This is Geoscience* campaign.

The suggestion to form a working group to determine the Society's objectives in supporting the campaign, Chaired by Professor Hammond and assisted by Dr Massey, was approved.

ACTION: Professor Hammond to Chair a 'task and finish' working group defining the case for supporting the *This is Geoscience* campaign and the outputs and outcomes the Society would seek. Council members interested in joining the working group to contact Professor Hammond.

4 Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer, Dr Parmar, spoke to his report noting the healthy performance of the Society's managed investment portfolio and the relatively high level of liquid funds.

Turning to small grants and awards, the majority of which are travel grants, he noted that the turnaround times could be shortened.

Dr Peel asked whether some level of decision making could be delegated to staff but Professor Lester felt that grants should be a Trustee decision.

Professor Lester suggested that travel grants should be assessed on a two-month timescale and Council agreed that this should be investigated. It was suggested that the effort expended in assessing grants be proportionate.

ACTION: Mr Russell to consider the viability and implications of assessing applications for travel grants every two months.

The Treasurer noted that one application had in error not been reviewed with the others.

The Treasurer updated Council on the latest forecast for the Society's income and expenditure, based on figures to October. Expenditure is broadly on budget but income is significantly ahead of budget due to better than expected financial performance of our scholarly journals. The Society is therefore projected to make a surplus of circa £1.4M in 2025.

The Treasurer explained that the budgeting process had been brought forward and Council was being asked to approve the budget proposed by the Finance Committee in December as opposed to the late spring which has been customary.

Council considered the proposed budget for 2026. [Redacted]

Significant potential liabilities regarding Burlington House were noted.

Professor Miller asked whether there would be an appetite among the other courtyard societies to put a roof over the courtyard to increase flexibility of the space and potential for revenue generation.

ACTION: Mr Russell to raise the concept of adding a roof to the courtyard with the other headlease holders.

The Treasurer introduced several proposals from the Finance Committee:

- The 2026 budget proposal was approved.
- A proposal to return the Open Access designated fund to general funds was approved.
- The proposal to make an early repayment of the loan for the Burlington House lease was approved.
- The proposal to move funds from our cash account into the managed investment fund was approved.
- The recommendations to engage an external consultant to advise on the options for the management of our current investment portfolio and to develop an investment strategy were approved.

ACTION: Ms Hensfield to implement the approved proposals.

5 Debate events proposed by Professor Martin Ward

Professor Martin Ward gave a presentation on an event series he had proposed. Professor Ward's proposal for lively debates on controversial astronomical topics was warmly welcomed. Mrs Devoil highlighted similar debate events she had been involved in organising at the Centre for Planetary Sciences and gave examples of previous debate themes to Professor Ward for reference.

ACTION: Mr Russell to take forward the proposal for debate meetings with Professor Ward.

Professor Eales joined the meeting.

6 Proposal to introduce additional research Fellowships

Dr Parmar spoke to his paper regarding research Fellowships. The Finance Committee had been asked to assess the affordability of additional Fellowships and the Treasurer reported that the Committee feels that four additional Fellowships – bringing the total to six – is manageable.

Dr Peel urged the Society to look at the whole lifecycle of the researcher to understand when and why people are dropping out of research noting that support is needed in mid-career which is not covered by the research Fellowships. He also noted the difficulties arising from the deferment of STFC funding and whether the Society had a role to play in assisting.

ACTION: Dr Peel to send thoughts regarding support for those suffering from the deferment of STFC funding to the President (cc Mr Russell) for consideration at a future meeting of Council.

Dr Opitom suggested that specific Fellowships could be crafted to support particular demographics as is the case with the Royal Society's Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowships aimed at scientists requiring a flexible working pattern due to personal circumstances.

Council held a robust discussion including issues such as:

- The balance of where the Society spends its funds, and in particular the desirability of small grants supporting a large number of people or larger expenditure (for example on Fellowships) benefiting a smaller number of individuals.
- Whether Fellowships should include overheads – noting that universities may be able to benefit from government funds.

Council agreed to increase the number of three-year (or equivalent if part-time) research Fellowships to two per year, starting with an additional Fellowship awarded from the applications received in 2025.

ACTION: Mr Russell to ensure that the number of research Fellowships is increased to two per year.

It was also agreed that the Society should investigate providing additional guidance for institutions to counter the arguments that hosting research Fellowships is a net cost to them.

ACTION: Mr Russell to investigate providing guidance as to how institutions can leverage hosting Fellowships to bring in additional funding.

7 Response to CDAG suggestions regarding awards

Professor Griffin spoke to paper C-2025-43 regarding the suggestions from the Committee on Diversity in Astronomy and Geophysics pertaining to the Society's awards programme. He noted that analysis of the statistics regarding the awards over the past two decades indicated that there is not a problem of bias in the awards process regarding gender or ethnic diversity.

CDAG had raised important issues and, having considered them, the Vice Presidents were recommending some of their suggestions be taken forward. However, the proposal to discontinue awards because they are inherently elitist was rejected as it is felt that awards play an important role in recognising excellence, promoting the field and providing role models.

The Vice Presidents recommended:

- CDAG be thanked for raising these important issues;
- bearing in mind that the awards are strongly biased in favour of UK-born and UK-based researchers, and that this could be viewed as justified given that the RAS is a UK organisation, Council consider whether the current balance is correct;
- Council aspire to the award winners showing a mild over-representation of currently under-represented groups to encourage nominations from those groups;
- the prohibition on candidates being made aware of their nominations be lifted, enabling nominators and nominees to work together to submit the highest quality cases, and also enabling systematic collection by the RAS of demographic data;
- to encourage nominations, the nomination process be made as simple as possible and that the awards be publicised as widely as possible, including internationally;
- Council consider the introduction of new awards that might help fill gaps in under-represented groups;

- there be formal representation from Council on CDAG (Mrs Devoil and Professor Curtis advised Council that they both sit on committee).

Mrs Devoil noted that there may be an issue with the way awards are perceived given that promotion of the awards often tends to focus on the 'senior' awards like the Gold medal. She suggested that communications should be handled carefully to ensure the breadth of the awards programme is highlighted.

ACTION: The Communications Officer to take careful consideration of the breadth and background to the awards when communicating the awardees.

Professor Lester suggested requesting CVs and applications in a standard format to make the assessment process easier.

Council agreed with the suggestion from Professor Lockwood that the stipulation that the Service Awards should recognise achievement that does not fall within the criteria of the Society's other awards should be dropped and it was agreed that the criteria for these awards should be examined.

Council discussed whether a Nominations Committee should be formed. On balance it was felt that nominations should remain independent of Council but that the Society could encourage of the formation of groups like the MIST Awards Task Force to stimulate nominations.

Professor Curtis raised the CDAG committee's point that relative disadvantage should be taken into account within the Society's awards programme, and that matching the demographics of past awards to current demographics in the community should not be considered to be a measure of success, since the latter are known to be biased against women and minority groups in senior roles. He expressed CDAG's view that an equally (or more) excellent person can achieve less overall on a CV than a less talented person, due to the former's relative disadvantage and that this change would therefore allow genuine excellence to be rewarded.

Professor Lockwood noted that allowance can be made in the awards criteria for those, for example, who have taken a career break but warned against any action that could give the perception that excellence was being deprioritised with respect to the Society's awards.

Council agreed that the demographic data in paper C-2025-43 should be shared with the Society's Awards and Grants Officer and with the suggestion from Professor Smith that the Society should investigate the nuanced way that the civil service now collect demographic data.

ACTION: Professor Smith to provide details of the demographic questions used by the civil service.

ACTION: Mr Russell to ensure that the demographic data presented in paper C-2025-43 should be shared with the Society's Awards and Grants Officer, who should also be asked to investigate the mechanisms used by the civil service to collect demographic information.

The recommendations of the Vice Presidents regarding the awards were accepted.

ACTION: Professor Griffin to draft a communication to CDAG for consideration by Council.

ACTION: Mr Russell and Dr Massey to work with the Awards and Grants Officer, the Vice Presidents and CDAG to implement the recommendations regarding awards.

The 2026 award recipients listed in paper C-2025-56 were approved.

It was noted that a consolidated table of all award recipients would be useful in future.

ACTION: Mr Russell to notify relevant staff regarding the 2026 award recipients and to ensure that in future all proposed award recipients are presented in a consolidated table.

8 Governance Review – summary and further actions

Mr Russell noted the recommendations brought forward by the Society's governance consultant regarding further changes to the Society's Bye-laws.

He noted the advice that Council should have the final decision on the ejection of a member.

Professor Miller requested that the advice that there should be no appeal once Council has made a decision to eject a member should be checked with the governance consultant.

ACTION: Mr Russell to check with the governance consultant that there can be no appeal once Council has decided to eject a member.

Mr Russell reported that the Code of Conduct is in the process of being redrafted to address the appeals issue and to bring it into line with the Society's revised Bye-laws.

ACTION: Professor Miller, Professor Lester and Dr Peel to assist Mr Russell in the revision of the Code of Conduct.

[Redacted]

Turning to proposed further changes to the Society's Bye-laws, Mr Russell noted that most of the suggestions had come from two individuals outside Council. Mr Russell and Professor Lockwood would write to thank them for their engagement and explain which of their proposals were being taken forward.

ACTION: Mr Russell to draft communications to the individuals concerned regarding their suggested changes to the Bye-laws.

Professor Lester agreed to work with Mr Russell on the implementation of the recommended changes to the Bye-laws to be put before the AGM in May 2026.

ACTION: Professor Lester and Mr Russell to ensure revisions to the Society's Bye-laws are put to the AGM in May 2026.

Council approved in principle the list of recommended changes, and Council members were asked to inform Mr Russell of any concerns or questions with the full list of recommendations included in paper **C-2025-42** by 31 December 2025.

ACTION: Council members to contact Mr Russell with any comments, concerns or questions regarding the governance recommendations and proposed changes to Bye-laws.

Noting that improvements to the action log and risk register had already been actioned, Council accepted the governance consultant's recommendations regarding further governance changes that do not relate to our governing documents.

ACTION: Mr Russell, Dr Parmar and the Society's Finance Director to consider the Treasurer's role with a view to making it less operational.

ACTION: Mr Russell to work with Dr Parmar and the Head of Membership to make suggestions to Council for revised and standardised Terms of Reference for the Society's committees.

9 Executive Director's update

Mr Russell's report was taken as read.

Professor Lockwood reminded Council that sensitive information regarding the Society's staff must remain confidential to Council.

10 Ballot List for 2026-27 Council Positions

Professor Lester outlined the nominations made for vacancies arising on Council in 2026 presented in paper C-2025-45. It was noted that the slate of candidates needed to be expanded to ensure greater diversity on the candidate list. Mrs Devoil suggested that more should be done to communicate the benefits of serving on Council.

ACTION: Council members to approach potential candidates to stand for positions on Council in 2026 and inform Professor Lester no later than two weeks before the next meeting of Council.

11 Publishing update

The paper was noted.

12 Membership

The new members proposed in paper C-2025-47 were approved.

13 Approval of new member of the Astronomical Heritage Committee

Council approved a new member of the Astronomical Heritage Committee. [Redacted]

14 Post-16 education and skills white paper

The paper was noted.

15 EU Space Act: Response from the Royal Astronomical Society

The paper was noted.

16 House of Lords UK Engagement with Space Committee report

The paper was noted.

17 ESA Ministerial 2025 (member states funding of ESA)

The paper was noted.

18 Minutes of the Astronomical Heritage Committee, 20 March 2025

The minutes were noted.

19 Minutes of the Library Committee, 16 April 2025

The minutes were noted.

20 Minutes of the Finance Committee meeting, 27 November 2025

The minutes were noted.

21 Any other business

Mrs Devoil had intended to raise the future of National Astronomy Week but, given the lack of time available to discuss the matter suggested that it should be deferred to the next Council meeting. Mr Russell expressed the hope that the Society's staff could put together a costed proposal for consideration.

ACTION: Mr Russell to add the future of National Astronomy Week to the agenda for the next Council meeting.

Mr Russell thanked Dr Gingell for representing the Society at The Caroline Herschel Prize Lecture in Bath on 20 November.

Mr Russell noted that Marie Hensfield has been promoted to Finance Director in recognition of the strategic focus she is bringing to our Finance function and improvements made and planned to our processes, policies and planning.

[Redacted]

Mr Russell acknowledged those who have made, or indicated their intention to make, gifts or bequests in favour of the Society this year.

22 Date of next meeting

Friday 13th February 2026 at the Royal Astronomical Society, Burlington House

There being no other business the meeting closed.