MINUTES

Council Meeting (March 2026)

A meeting of the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society was held from 11:00am on Friday 13th March 2026 at the Royal Astronomical Society, Burlington House, and online via Microsoft Teams.

Present:

Dr Chrysa Avdellidou (Councillor, G; online)
Dr Alan Cayless (Councillor, A)
Prof. Paul Crowther (Vice President, A)
Prof. Andrew Curtis (Councillor, G; online)
Mrs Karen Anne Devoil (Councillor, G)
Dr Imogen Gingell (Councillor, G)
Prof. Matthew Griffin (Vice President, A)
Prof. James Hammond (Geophysics Secretary, G)
Dr Iain Hannah (Councillor, G; online)
Prof. Mark Lester (Senior Secretary, G)
Prof. Mike Lockwood (President, G; Chair)
Prof. Steve Miller (Vice President, G)
Dr Cyrielle Opitom (Councillor, A)
Dr Arvind Parmar (Treasurer, A/G)
Dr Mike Peel (Councillor, A; online)
Prof. Caroline Smith (Vice President, G)
Dr Ashley Spindler (Councillor, A; online)
Dr Sheona Urquhart (Astronomy Secretary, A)
Prof. Derek Ward-Thompson (Councillor, A; online)
Prof. Jim Wild (President Elect, G)

In attendance:

Ms Elaine Ellis (Head of Membership)
Mr Ian Russell (Executive Director)
Dr Robert Massey (Deputy Executive Director)
Ms Marieta Valdivia Lefort (Policy & Diversity Officer) – for item 2

1 Welcome and apologies for absence

The Chair welcomed Council members to the meeting.

Apologies had been received from Professor Stephen Eales and Dr Andrew Young.

2 Staff Presentation

Ms Marieta Valdivia Lefort gave a brief overview of her role as Policy & Diversity Officer including support for the Society's diversity agenda and policy work on dark skies and satellite constellations.

Ms Valdivia Lefort mentioned a new initiative working with Prospero Space Fellowship and Professor Smith suggested linking with the European Space Agency who have a strong programme of placements for early career scientists and engineers.

ACTION: Ms Valdivia Lefort to contact the European Space Agency to explore potential opportunities with the Prospero Space Fellowship.

Mrs Devoil enquired if the Early Career Network's representative would continue to attend CDAG meetings in future. Ms Valdivia Lefort confirmed that the ECN would indeed be involved in future CDAG meetings.

On behalf of Council, Professor Lockwood thanked Ms Valdivia Lefort, and Dr Robert Massey and Sam Tonkin, for their work over the past months responding to the STFC budget crisis.

3 Declarations of interest

Council noted the Conflict of Interest register (paper C-2026-14). Council members were reminded to send any updates to the Executive Director and if any real or perceived undeclared conflicts arose during the meeting to disclose them immediately.

4 Minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2026 and matters arising

The Minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2026 were approved.

4.1 Frequency of assessing grant applications

Ms Ellis updated Council on proposed changes to assess small grants monthly or every two months. She noted that the capability of a new membership management computer system to administer grants was being investigated and that this may streamline processes. She has arranged meetings with the awards and grants committees to discuss requirements with them and ensure that they support the changes being proposed.

4.2 Response to CDAG

Professor Lockwood reported that he had joined the meeting of the Committee on Diversity in Astronomy and Geophysics (CDAG) on 10 March 2026.

During the meeting, CDAG raised concerns about the level of funding for undergraduate bursaries. It does not appear that this issue had formally been escalated to Council previously. However, independently it had been discussed at the meeting of Council held in July 2025 during which Council agreed to raise the bursary from £1,200 to £1,500 for the upcoming round and also to review comparable schemes to inform future adjustments and revisit the bursary level once more financial data is available.

ACTION: Mr Russell and Dr Parmar to discuss further review of the financial support provided under the undergraduate bursary scheme.

Mrs Devoil commented that some of CDAG's concerns might be alleviated if the awards panel and process was a little more transparent (provided that this can be done in such a way as to prevent any potential lobbying of individuals).

4.3 Host venue for NAM 2027

Mr Russell noted that he had met with a potential host regarding the National Astronomy Meeting in 2027. While discussions are ongoing, this does not appear to be a strong possibility, and so Mr Russell will continue with plans to send out a call for interested parties. A further suggested institution will also be approached.

ACTION: Mr Russell to issue a call to heads of departments to express interest in hosting a future NAM.

ACTION: Mr Russell to approach a further potential host regarding hosting NAM in 2027.

5 Report from the Treasurer

Dr Parmar introduced his report (paper C-2026-15) noting that the Society's managed investment portfolio had continued to perform well in the first two months of the year, although the figures in the report pre-dated more recent volatility in global equity markets.

Cash at bank has declined as the Society has, as agreed by Council, made a further repayment of the loan against the lease of Burlington House.

5.1 Membership fees

Dr Parmar proposed increases to membership fees of 3.4% that being the Consumer Price Index figure as of December 2025; the proposed increase was then rounded down to the nearest pound as has been the practice in recent years. Council felt that it was better to make annual inflationary adjustments to mitigate against the need to make larger increases in future.

The proposed membership fees were approved.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to ensure that the proposed membership fees are brought before the membership at the Annual General Meeting for approval.

6 Publications price increases 2026-2027

Dr Parmar introduced paper C-2026-16 outlining proposed increases to the Article Publication Charges (APCs) levied by the Society's research journals and the institutional subscription rates for *Astronomy & Geophysics*.

The proposal to freeze APCs across the portfolio was approved.

For institutional subscriptions to *Astronomy & Geophysics,* OUP had proposed a:

- 4% increase on online only subscriptions
- 6% increase on print, and combined print and online, subscriptions

The proposed price increases to institutional subscription rates for *Astronomy & Geophysics* were approved.

ACTION: Mr Russell to ask the publishing team to communicate the agreed rates to OUP.

7 RAS Support for Geophysics in the UK

Professor Hammond presented a business case for additional resource to support a campaign aimed at increasing the number of undergraduates studying geophysics (paper C-2026-17 refers). He highlighted the fundamental problem that employers are seeking geophysics graduates but there is a lack of awareness among A-level students of what geophysics is.

A Society supported post could, for example:

- Increase awareness among teachers, parents and students.
- Raise awareness of the prerequisites to read geophysics, including maths A-level.

- Coordinate efforts with other organisations and potentially the outreach departments of relevant universities.
- Raise awareness of geophysics among the general public, for instance by attempting to gain interest for a television series (it was noted that actor and comedian Nick Mohammed started a geophysics PhD at Cambridge).
- Publicising the importance of geophysics to the study of exoplanets.
- Linking and signposting geophysics elements of high-profile missions.
- Promote the availability masters degrees to help meet the demand for suitably qualified graduates.
- Seeking to increase the amount of geophysics in undergraduate physics degrees.
- Investigate the opportunities for degree apprenticeships.
- Longer-term issues like seeking to influence the secondary school curriculum.

Such a role would allow the Society to take leadership on geophysics and define and control its own programme.

Professor Ward-Thompson questioned why the Society should spend significant funds supporting "one particular, small area" when all of the sciences supported by the Society are facing an existential threat.

After discussion, Council requested a proposal to increase resource to further support other areas of interest to the Society, particularly given the proposed cuts to STFC funding.

ACTION: Dr Massey to put forward a proposal for an additional policy role to provide advocacy across the sciences of interest to the Society.

The proposal to recruit a full-time policy position to support geophysics for a fixed-term three-year project was approved.

Professor Ward-Thompson and Professor Crowther opposed the proposal.

ACTION: Dr Massey to work with Professor Hammond to develop a job description for the role and proceed with recruitment.

8 Royal Astronomical Society Fellowship Applications

Professor Wild presented five recommendations on the operation of the Society's research Fellowships which are particularly pertinent given the recent decision by Council to increase the number of Fellowships.

1. Candidates should no longer be required to identify two referees at the application stage. The panel will retain independent reviewers for shortlisted proposals.

After discussion this proposal was approved.

2. The application should include a statement from the Head of Department that confirms the Fellowship holder will be accepted as an employee, comments on the suitability of the host institution and outlines how the individual will be supported.

After discussion this proposal was approved.

3. The applicant eligibility criteria should prohibit any member of Council from applying for, or holding, a RAS Fellowship.

The proposal that a member of Council should not be able to hold an RAS Fellowship and vice versa was approved.

Council also resolved that if a Council member wishes to apply for a Fellowship then they should resign from Council before making the application. Professor Miller voted against stating his belief that disallowing Council members from applying for RAS Fellowships may discourage good candidates who are earlier in their careers from standing for Council; his preference was that Council members should be allowed to apply but should stand down from Council if successful.

4. The institutional eligibility criteria should be revised such that any institution hosting a RAS Fellowship is ineligible to host another for a period starting three years after the original Fellowship's start date.

After a robust discussion Council agreed to the general principle that the criteria should be constructed so as not to disincentivise an institution from supporting a part-time Fellowship or from allowing Fellowships to be paused in order to accommodate, for example, an extended period of serious ill health.

5. An appropriate mechanism should be initiated that prevents (or at least discourages) a large volume of RAS Fellowships applications from one institution.

Council noted the following points:

a. Consideration would need to be given to whether any cap would apply at institution, school, department or college level (Professor Lester).
b. A cap could encourage applicants to approach alternative host institutions (Professor Hammond).
c. A smaller cap applied at department or college level may be preferable (Professor Crowther).
d. No institution should support more than four applications, and no unit within it more than one (Professor Miller).
e. Council should decide whether the limit on Fellowships held applies at institution or unit level and set any cap at one accordingly (Professor Ward-Thompson).
f. A ranked list may be preferable to a small cap, as limiting institutions to one applicant could reduce diversity, with institutions favouring candidates perceived as safest or topics (Dr Peel).
g. The Panel's selection criteria should be clear and published, so institutions know what to consider when choosing candidates to support (Dr Opitom).
h. The EDI impact of any mechanism to manage demand should be considered (Dr Opitom).
i. Applying is a valuable learning opportunity even for unsuccessful candidates (Dr Opitom).

ACTION: Professor Wild to reflect on the discussion and the points raised and make suggestions to Council on the last two recommendations, perhaps presenting different options for mechanisms to manage the number of applications from individual institutions.

Professor Wild also noted that we constitute a new Fellowship panel every year which means there is no institutional memory.

ACTION: Professor Wild to consider whether the RAS Fellowship Panel should have members serving for multiple years.

Dr Urquhart left the meeting.

9 Request for RAS participation in the Committee on Radio Astronomy Frequencies as an Observer

Dr Massey introduced paper C-2026-20 recommending that the Society apply for Observer status on the Committee on Radio Astronomy Frequencies (CRAF) and to nominate a representative.

It was noted that Observer status would afford the Society:

- Early visibility of spectrum developments and emerging interference risks affecting radio astronomy and space science, enabling more timely, informed, and effective policy engagement.
- Improved alignment and coordination with the European expert community working directly on spectrum protection and associated technical evidence-gathering.
- A practical and structured channel through which the Society can better represent UK community interests in a regulatory environment where competition for spectrum is intensifying.

The proposal for the Society to apply for Observer status on CRAF was approved.

Ms Valdivia Lefort was suggested as the Society's representative and, as a radio astronomer, Dr Peel offered to support her.

ACTION: Dr Massey and Ms Valdivia Lefort to take forward the Society's application to join CRAF as an observer.

Professor Curtis left the meeting.

10 Executive Director's update

Mr Russell updated Council on staffing matters.

Mr Russell thanked Dr Chris Lee and Dr Olivia Keenan for their work as Honorary Auditors.

The Society will be interviewing architects to support the redevelopment of Burlington House. The request for proposals is a functional document but we will be asking the architects for their proposals as to how best to involve the Council on the look, feel, atmosphere and ambiance of the venue.

Dr Cayless suggested that risks relating to the wider courtyard estate, including maintenance and renovation work around the courtyard, be reviewed on the Society's risk register.

ACTION: Mr Russell to review the risk register to ensure that courtyard-wide risks to the premises are appropriately recorded and mitigated and raised with the other courtyard CEOs if required.

11 Proposed amendments to the Bye-laws

Mr Russell introduced the paper C-2026-21. With valuable input from Professor Lester, the paper proposed a number of relatively minor amendments to the Society's Bye-laws to go before the Fellowship for approval at the Annual General Meeting (AGM). These were based on suggestions from a number of Fellows, following the more extensive update of the Bye-laws resulting from the recent governance review.

The recommended changes to the Bye-laws to go forward to the membership were approved.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to ensure that the proposed changes to the Bye-laws are put to the membership for approval by the AGM.

ACTION: Mr Russell and Professor Lockwood to write to Fellows to explain the outcome of their suggestions.

12 Proposed amendments to the Code of Conduct

A working group comprising Professor Lester, Professor Miller, Dr Peel and Mr Russell had reviewed the Society's Code of Conduct considering insight from the governance review and recent experience (paper C-2026-22 refers).

The Code of Conduct had been reordered and changes proposed to the procedures used to resolve allegations.

Professor Griffin raised the following points:

a. A number of grammatical errors that will be corrected.

b. Proposed Clause 11, regarding serious criminal offences, may benefit from re-drafting to make its intention clearer.

ACTION: Professor Griffin to propose revised wording of Clause 11 of the Code of Conduct.

c. Proposed Clause 12, "Fellows should conduct themselves in a manner which does not damage the Society or its reputation": It was felt that this wording may discourage whistleblowing. Following discussion it was suggested that Clause 12 should be reworded to state:

"Without just cause, Fellows should not (a) conduct themselves in a manner which damages the Society or its reputation, or that of the Society's staff, elected officers and councillors performing duties on behalf of the Society, and (b) should not take part in any activity which is in conflict with the overall Objectives of the Society."

d. Proposed Clause 28 regarding the definition of harassment: Care needs to be taken that the list of protected characteristics matches that in UK law. It was also noted that "…with the aim of violating an individual's dignity…" should be changed to "…with the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity…". It was suggested that Clause 28 should read:

"Harassment is considered to be bullying and/or victimisation and/or unwanted conduct related to a "protected characteristic" and is as defined in Section 26 of the Equality Act 2010 or subsequent UK legislation that replaces it."

Dr Peel noted that the Code of Conduct for meetings will also need to be reviewed in light of this change.

e. In the procedures for dealing with complaints, whether 14 days was too short a period as a deadline to reply. Following discussion Council was content with 14 days.

In addition, Dr Cayless noted that proposed Clauses 16, 19 and 20 contain hyperlinks to external documents and argued that this should be avoided as links often break over time and the URLs are not obvious should the document be printed.

Council had a robust discussion about proposed Clause 19 regarding ethical scientific conduct. It was proposed that the clause should be redrafted to state:

"In their professional conduct, Fellows of the Royal Astronomical Society are expected to behave ethically, adhering to core principles of honesty, integrity, and accountability. Fellows are encouraged to reflect on relevant guidance including the UK government's *Rigour, respect, responsibility: a universal ethical code for scientists*."

ACTION: Mr Russell to consolidate Council's suggestions into a further iteration of the Code of Conduct for consideration between meetings.

13 Travel and expenses policy

Mr Russell introduced a proposed new *Travel and expenses policy* that had been produced in conjunction with Dr Parmar in order to provide improved guidance to staff and volunteers and reduce queries arising from ambiguity (paper C-2026-23).

A number of questions and queries were raised:

a. That the section on private motor vehicles should make it clear that reference to "usual place of work" relates only to staff.
b. The policy should provide clear guidance on reasonable hospitality, including at events such as the strategy away days.
c. The Society might consider introducing per diem expenses for volunteers and staff; Dr Peel noted that Wikimedia UK's expense policy might be helpful, particularly around per diems.
d. The wording regarding advanced rail fares should be amended to say the least expensive ticket available taking advantage of advanced fares, rail cards etc.
e. That the principle for having the same rules for staff and volunteers was a good one.

ACTION: Mr Russell to revisit the proposed Travel and expenses policy with the Treasurer in light of the comments made by Council members.

14 Membership

Ms Ellis introduced the membership report (paper C-2026-24). Membership numbers were similar to those reported at the last meeting of Council. We had been notified of two deaths and eight resignations. There were six reinstatements over the same period.

Mrs Devoil and others noted that many high-profile scientists in Astronomy and Geophysics are not currently members of the Society, and that perhaps ideas for addressing this membership drive could be discussed at the retreat in September.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to ensure that attracting and retaining high-profile scientists to membership is discussed at the strategy away days in September.

Council was asked to approve 34 new applications. Of those 71% are students, 74% are from applicants based in the UK and 38% are from applicants identifying as women.

One application was deferred pending further information.

The remaining 33 applications were approved.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to ensure that the approved applications are admitted to membership.

15 STFC cuts response – update

Dr Massey summarised the fast-moving situation with the proposed cuts to STFC funded research grants and recapped the activities that the Society's policy team had taken in response, including engagement with government, parliamentarians, the media and partner organisations, and support for Fellows in raising concerns with their MPs.

On behalf of Council Professor Lockwood thanked Dr Massey and his team again for their hugely important work. He noted that the Society is playing a significant part in addressing this crisis. He also recorded thanks to Catherine Heymans, Astronomer Royal for Scotland, for her support and assistance.

16 Technology update

The update in paper C-2026-25 was noted.

17 Minutes of the Geophysical Journal International Editorial Board meeting held on 4 February 2026

The Minutes were noted.

18 Minutes of the RAS Techniques and Instruments Editorial Board meeting held on 11 February 2026

The Minutes were noted.

19 Minutes of the RAS Policy Group meeting held on 21 October 2025

The Minutes were noted.

20 Any other business

There being no further business the meeting closed.