MINUTES

Royal Astronomical Society

Council Meeting (July 2026)

A meeting of the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society was held from 1 pm on Thursday 23 July 2026 at the National Astronomy Meeting held at Birmingham University, and online via Microsoft Teams.

Present:

Prof. David Alexander, Councillor (A)
Dr Chrysa Avdellidou, Councillor (G)
Prof. Paul Crowther, Vice President (A)
Prof. Andrew Curtis, Councillor (G)
Mrs Karen Anne Devoil, Councillor (G)
Prof. Stephen Eales, Councillor (A)
Prof. Peter Gallagher, Councillor (G)
Prof. Matt Griffin, Astronomical Secretary (G)
Dr Iain Hannah, Councillor (G)
Dr Olivia Keenan, Councillor, (A)
Prof. Mark Lester, Senior Secretary (G)
Prof. Steve Miller, Vice President (G)
Dr Andy Nowacki, Vice President (G)
Dr Cyrielle Opitom, Councillor (A)
Dr Arvind Parmar, Treasurer (A/G)
Dr Mike Peel, Councillor (A)
Prof. Jorick Vink, Vice President (A)
Prof. Jim Wild, President (Chair; G)
Dr Emma Woodfield, Councillor (G)
Dr Andrew Young, Councillor (A)

In attendance:

Ms Elaine Ellis (Head of Membership)
Ms Sian Prosser (Librarian & Archivist)
Mrs Sue Cleverdon (Facilities Consultant)
Dr Robert Massey (Deputy Executive Director)

1 Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed Council members to the meeting.

Apologies had been received from Mr Ian Russell (Executive Director) and Prof. James Hammond, (Geophysics Secretary)

2 Declarations of Interest

It was noted that the register of declarations of interest was now complete, although the final version was not fully reflected in the version circulated with the papers. 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.

3 Minutes of the meeting held on 8th May 2026, and matters arising

It was reported that all actions from the previous meeting were either in hand or completed. The action tracker would be reinstated in the regular minutes from October.

The following corrections were noted:
Prof. Matt Griffin had been recorded as attending the meeting but had not been present and had sent apologies; the minutes should record their apologies.

Raised by the Chair, the name of one of the research fellows under item 13 had been recorded incorrectly and should be corrected.

Dr Mike Peel noted that he had attended the May meeting in person not online as suggested by the minutes.

Subject to the above amendments, the minutes were approved.

ACTION: Secretariat to make the corrections to the minutes of 8 May 2026.

Strategic Items

4 Refurbishment of Burlington House – project update

This item was taken after item 10.

Council received a presentation from the Society's property and facilities consultant, Sue Cleverdon and representatives of Gibson Thornley Architects, who are the appointed lead architects, on the progress of the refurbishment design study.

An extraordinary meeting will be held in August for the Council to discuss the architect's proposal in more detail.

Operational Items

5 Executive Director's update

The Chair reported that NAM 2027 had been agreed with the University of Leeds, to be held from 11-16 July 2027.

Mrs Karen Anne Devoil asked when Council would receive a comprehensive review of the final NAM 2026 figures, including the proportion of attendees who were RAS Fellows, how many had joined as Fellows as a result of the new fee structure, and demographic information. Dr Robert Massey reported that registrations were healthy with an increase in registrations by Fellows. Mrs Karen Anne Devoil noted that planetary science attendance had been lower this year because the British Planetary Science Conference had taken place about a month earlier, and that the planetary community would be encouraged to attend next year's meeting.

ACTION: Mr Russell to provide a full breakdown of NAM 2026 registration statistics (including Fellow/non-Fellow proportions, conversions to Fellowship and demographics) to be provided to a future meeting.

Staffing

Council was updated on recent staffing matters.

6 Approval of the Burlington House Refurbishment Design Study Steering Group Terms of Reference

The Chair noted that the Terms of Reference had previously been circulated to Council by email and no comments had been received, but formal approval had not yet been minuted. The Steering Group acts as the interface between Council and the buildings consultant and architects, and comprises some of the Officers and other members of Council.

Prof. Andrew Curtis suggested that the reference to providing flexible meeting spaces should be broadened to include working spaces. This was agreed.

Prof. Mark Lester asked about the process and timeline for engaging with staff, the Fellowship and other stakeholders. It was reported that costed options would be presented at the extraordinary Council meeting in August, that Council would ultimately decide the direction, and that the approach to Fellowship engagement was still to be defined. It was suggested that, at a minimum, there should be a report to the AGM, although it was suggested that this might be too late and that earlier communication with the Fellowship (for example by email) should be considered. Dr Mike Peel suggested that more specific aims for the refurbishment should be articulated early, to explain the reasons for the project to the membership.

The Chair confirmed that the architects had already been given an initial brief for the design outline, and that the Terms of Reference concerned how the project is managed rather than the final design.

Council approved the Terms of Reference, subject to the amendment to refer to flexible meeting and working spaces.

ACTION: Mr Ian Russell to amend the Refurbishment Design Study Steering Group Terms of Reference to refer to "flexible meeting and working spaces".

7 Library Committee and Astronomical Heritage Committee

Ms Sian Prosser reported that the chairs of both committees were stepping down after long service. Council was asked to approve Dr Daniel Belteki as Chair of the Astronomical Heritage Committee, Dr Richard McKim as Chair of the Library Committee, and Megan Rhian Briers as a new member of the Library Committee.

Council thanked the outgoing chairs, Dr Lee Macdonald and Dr Rebekah Higgitt, for their service. It was noted that their length of service had exceeded the committee's terms of reference but had provided valuable continuity. It was suggested that the outgoing chairs should receive a personal letter of thanks.

All appointments were approved.

ACTION: Mr Russell to arrange letters of thanks to be sent to the outgoing chairs.

8 Membership

8.1 Membership Report

Head of Membership, Ms Elaine Ellis, gave an update on membership number detailing that since the last meeting there had been two deaths, four resignations and six reinstatements.

Ms Ellis noted that anecdotal evidence suggested the reduced NAM registration rate for Fellows had encouraged applications, and that 75 candidates at this point in the year were higher than in previous years. NAM had also generated positive interest in RAS Fellowship.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to analyse and report final figures and the impact of the NAM discount on Fellowship applications to a future Council meeting.

Council discussed the difficulty of linking NAM registration to the membership database when NAM is run by a separate organisation. Ms Ellis noted that the planned new CRM system would ideally allow the Society to sell tickets in-house and hold the data directly, possibly in time for the next NAM.

8.2 New Fellows for approval

75 candidates had been proposed for election to Fellowship and that no concerns had been raised.

All 75 candidates were approved for election to Fellowship.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to inform the Membership Officer of approved membership candidates so that applicants can be notified.

9 Policy

9.1 STFC funding settlement – update

Dr Robert Massey reported that, since the last meeting:

- The reported outcome of the STFC settlement was that the reduction to the grants line would be around 2.7%, albeit from a historically lower baseline. This was an improvement on the position earlier in the year.
- Projects remained subject to an overall cut of around 10%. [Redacted] Work was under way to collate anonymised data from project holders on the financial impact and job losses.
- A parliamentary event held around six weeks earlier had been attended by around 30 MPs. Further parliamentary questions had since been tabled, and there had been further scrutiny by the Commons and Lords science committees.
- A Freedom of Information response had shown that facilities costs, rather than international subscriptions, had been the main source of cost pressure. Further FOI requests, including on the prioritisation exercise and energy costs, were outstanding.
- Council discussed STFC's responses at the NAM community session, including on the commitment made in Parliament to protect postdoctoral positions and on the FOI requests.
- With the change of administration, it was unclear what priority would be given to the issue; some announcements appeared to be on hold.

The Chair noted that, while the PPAN area had benefited from some protection compared with other parts of STFC, the outcome remained a serious concern and the Society would continue to press the case. The Chair also noted that colleagues in other areas were facing very significant challenges, and that the current position was the result of sustained work by the community.

Council discussed the wider impact of the cuts, including on public engagement activity and the UK's international partnerships.

9.2 House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee: Inquiry into Science Diplomacy

Council noted the report. It was also reported by Dr Robert Massey that the House of Commons Education Committee had agreed with the Society's recommendations on supporting strategically vulnerable subjects.

Prof. David Alexander asked whether the Society's advocacy could draw further on the importance of international collaboration. Dr Massey agreed that this was a good point and that the Society could refer to its recommendations on this.

10 Minutes of the Committee on Diversity in Astronomy and Geophysics (CDAG) meeting held on 10 March 2026

The minutes were received for information and taken as read. The Chair noted that a paper would be submitted to Council at the October meeting for the Council to consider.

11 AOB

No other business was raised.

12 Date of next meeting

Friday 9 October 2026 to be a hybrid meeting held at Burlington House and online via Microsoft Teams.