MINUTES

Council Meeting (May 2026)

A meeting of the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society was held from 11:00am on Friday 8th May 2026 at the Royal Astronomical Society, Burlington House, and online via Microsoft Teams.

Present:	Dr Chrysa Avdellidou (Councillor, G; online) Prof. Steve Miller (Vice President, G) Dr Alan Cayless (Councillor, A) Dr Cyrielle Opitom (Councillor, A) Prof. Paul Crowther (Vice President, A) Prof. Stephen Eales (Councillor, A) Dr Arvind Parmar (Treasurer, A/G) Dr Mike Peel (Councillor, A) Mrs Karen Anne Devoil (Councillor, G) Prof. Caroline Smith (Vice President, G) Dr Imogen Gingell (Councillor, G) Dr Ashley Spindler (Councillor, A; online) Prof. James Hammond (Geophysics Secretary, G) Prof. Derek Ward-Thompson (Councillor, A; online) Dr Iain Hannah (Councillor, G; online) Prof. Mark Lester (Senior Secretary, G) Prof. Jim Wild (President Elect, G) Prof. Mike Lockwood (President, G; Chair)
In attendance:	Ms Elaine Ellis (Head of Membership) Mr Ian Russell (Executive Director) Dr Robert Massey (Deputy Executive Director)

Agenda

1 Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed Council members to the meeting. Apologies had been received from Prof. Andrew Curtis, Prof. Matthew Griffin and Dr Sheona Urquhart.

2 Declarations of Interest

Declarations of interest were noted and the Conflicts of Interest register updated. 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 Friday, 13th March, and matters arising

The Action Tracker was updated, and it was noted that there are outstanding actions relating to NAM and National Astronomy Week. Mrs Devoil advised that the outcome of the recent NAW meeting was that Dr Massey was planning to submit a paper for the October meeting with recommendations for Council to consider.

One correction was noted relating to policy positions, and the wording was updated to include geophysics. The minutes from the March meeting were accepted.

ACTION: Dr Robert Massey to submit a paper to the Council for the October meeting to consider NAW outcomes.

Finance

4 Annual report and Financial Statements for 2025 and Professional Audit.

4.1 Annual Report and Financial Statements

Prof Mike Lockwood, as Chair of the Royal Astronomical Society, signed the Financial Statements for 2025 in the meeting.

Council noted that the UK Planetary Forum had been inadvertently omitted from the Annual Report. The Forum will be included in next year's report.

Members were reminded of the value of reviewing draft sections before finalisation, as circulated. It was acknowledged that reviewing the entire report can be daunting, and it was suggested that, as in previous years, specific sections might be allocated to individual Council members for proofreading.

Council asked that thanks be passed to staff for their extensive contributions to the report, which was widely praised.

ACTION: The UK Planetary Forum will be included in next year's annual report.

4.2 Post Audit Report from the Independent Auditors

Council received the external audit report and welcomed Ms Kath Patel from Buzzacott, who has taken over as audit partner following the required rotation.

Audit overview

Ms Patel presented a summary of the audit findings. The post-audit report has been issued and discussed in detail with the Finance Committee. There are no significant unresolved matters, and the auditors are ready to sign the report subject to Council approval.

Audit progress was supported by the provision of high-quality information, with particular thanks noted to the RAS Finance Director, Ms Marie Hensfield. Adjustments were limited to minor disclosure tweaks, primarily within the staffing costs note. There are no unadjusted errors of significance.

Audit opinion and controls

The draft accounts presented for approval include an unqualified and unmodified audit opinion, confirming that the accounts give a true and fair view. No significant weaknesses were identified in internal controls or financial systems. All identified audit risk areas were satisfactorily addressed.

Recommendations and future actions

The report includes several minor recommendations, all accepted by management and in progress.

Reserves policy review

Council will need to clarify its target level of free reserves. Ms Patel noted that the Charity Commission no longer gives a standard benchmark, and appropriate reserve levels depend on working capital needs, contingency planning, investment strategy, and the Society's risk profile. Given the material income from OUP, continued oversight is important to ensure completeness and accuracy. New SORP (Statement of Recommended Practice) applicable for the December 2026 year-end:

Key changes concern lease accounting, income recognition, and enhanced narrative/impact reporting in the Trustees' Report.

Ms Hensfield will begin assessing the implications, with further review planned with the auditors.

Professor Miller raised a question about the level of reserves the Society should hold, given current strategic challenges. The auditor confirmed that the reserves review will help determine an appropriate target and noted that many charities historically hold more than they strictly need. Further detail was requested on upcoming SORP changes, which Ms Patel summarised that the Society would possibly need to bring operating leases onto the balance sheet, make minor adjustments to income recognition policies, and include more impact-focused narrative reporting.

Council noted the positive outcome of the audit. Appreciation was expressed to Ms Patel and the Buzzacott team and to Dr Arvind Parmar and RAS staff for their work in delivering a clean audit.

4.3 Letter of Representation

Council was asked to vote on the Letter of Representation, which would allow Dr Parmar the authority to sign the Letter of Representation. By a show of hands, Council unanimously voted to approve the Letter of Representation.

5 Report from the Treasurer

Dr Parmar introduced his report (C-2026-31), noting that there are no decision items in this report; however, there are two discussion points.

The first point of discussion was the Small Grants Awards, which have seen a significant increase in the February 2026 round. Dr Parmar suggested that the Society should, in the near future, conduct a strategic review of the awards.

Secondly, Dr Parmar reported on the outcome of the audit, noting that the audit went very smoothly and showed the Society to be in good financial shape, and commended the Society's Finance Director, Ms Marie Hensfield, for her very effective financial management. Council expressed its thanks to both Dr Parmar and Ms Hensfield for their excellent work on delivering a clean audit.

6 Risk Register

Council reviewed the current risk register. Each senior management team (SMT) member continues to assess their allocated risks monthly, with periodic SMT-wide reviews ahead of consideration by the Finance Committee and Council.

Red Risks

Publishing income
Remains a key risk following the transition to Open Access and wider uncertainty in the scholarly publishing landscape. The inherent volatility of Open Access business models was highlighted although income has so far remained resilient, and the probability rating may be reduced as

submission levels stabilise and additional longitudinal data becomes available. Council emphasised ongoing concern about reduced submissions to Monthly Notices.

Burlington House maintenance
Courtyard societies are working jointly to quantify long-term maintenance liabilities associated with the newly acquired 999-year lease. Although costs may be high, more certainty is expected over the next 12 months, and the risk level should reduce accordingly.

Disabled access
Accessibility of the building was identified as a high risk, and work to restore full access is being treated as urgent.

Publishing low-quality research
In common with other scholarly journals, Monthly Notices is receiving an increased number of low-quality submissions, including suspected AI-generated or paper-mill content. The editorial team is exercising increased vigilance. Council discussed the evolving difficulty of detecting AI-generated text, the limitations of emerging tools, and the broader reputational risk. Suggestions included requiring authors to declare any AI use and potentially submitting prompts as part of reproducibility documentation; this will be taken forward as an action for the editorial board.

Motivations behind AI-generated or fraudulent submissions were discussed, including pressure to publish, lack of affiliation, and misplaced confidence derived from AI tools.

Events held off-site may warrant explicit inclusion in the risk register; this will be explored.

Strategic Items

7 Report from the Honorary Auditors

Council received the report from the Honorary Auditors. The Chair noted that it contains substantial background, observations, and recommendations, and proposed that detailed discussion be deferred to a future meeting, with membership-related elements to be considered at the away days. Council agreed.

The Chair expressed appreciation for the auditors' work, describing the report as high-quality and valuable in highlighting areas requiring Council's attention. Thanks will also be given at the AGM.

Mrs Devoil raised questions about how interviewees for the audit are selected. Currently, the Executive Director provides a proposed list aiming for representation across departments; the auditors may adjust it. Council agreed that a more open process would be beneficial. Suggestions included notifying Council in advance and introducing random selection elements.

ACTION: Mr Russell to review how interviewees are selected for the Honorary Audit.

It was noted that the Honorary Auditors focus on governance, not finances, in line with the bye-laws. Professional/financial auditors handle the financial audit separately.

There was a brief discussion on whether the term "Honorary Auditors" is potentially misleading, although changes would require amendments to the bye-laws.

Council discussed observations in the report about team capacity and organisational resilience. Building resilience is challenging for a small organisation, but efforts are being made to identify opportunities for strengthening roles and cover. For specialist areas such as policy, digitisation, and heritage management, Council acknowledged that prioritisation may be necessary.

The Chair noted that the Executive intends to produce a formal response to the report. Council discussed whether audits should occur annually or biennially. While the bye-laws allow annual audits, they do not require them. An audit will proceed next year, with Dr Chris Lee and Dr Kim Clube serving as auditors following a change in eligibility due to a Council appointment.

8 Update on submissions to our research journals

Council took the paper as read. Mr Russell provided an update on behalf of the Head of Publishing.

Monthly Notices (MNRAS)

Submissions remain below pre-transition levels but show signs of modest recovery. Some of the recent increase in submissions consists of low-quality papers, including suspected AI-generated material, which are being rejected. The overall trend is positive but slower than hoped.

Mr Russell and the Head of Publishing recently met with the incoming Editor-in-Chief, Professor Matt Middleton, who has brought a strong set of ideas to reinvigorate the journal. Council expressed enthusiasm for his planned approach.

Geophysical Journal International (GJI)

GJI has rebounded strongly. Submissions in 2025 returned to pre-Open-Access levels. Year-to-date submissions for 2026 exceed those of the previous three years, indicating healthy growth. The journal continues to make a meaningful financial contribution and maintain a strong disciplinary presence.

RAS Techniques & Instruments (RASTI)

RASTI continues steady growth, with year-to-date submissions nearly doubling. The first Impact Factor is expected soon, which typically leads to an increase in submissions.

Editor-in-Chief Jonathan Tennyson is performing strongly, and plans are in place to capitalise on the Impact Factor boost. Council expects significant further growth over the coming years.

9 Contract with Oxford University Press for publishing services.

Council considered a recommendation from the Publishing Management Committee, presented by Mr Russell, that the Society allow the current publishing contract with Oxford University Press (OUP) to roll over for a further 12 months.

Mr Russell declared an interest as a former employee of OUP.

Mr Russell outlined the reasoning behind the recommendation. The priority for the coming period is the successful onboarding of Professor Middleton as the new Editor-in-Chief of Monthly Notices, and the Society will also be heavily engaged with planning for the 200th anniversary celebrations in 2027.

Professor Ward-Thompson expressed the view that providing stability for the new Editor-in-Chief was wise.

Professor Hammond sought clarification on when the arrangement would next be discussed. Mr Russell confirmed that the contract would be reviewed annually.

Council voted to allow the contract to roll over for one additional year. The vote was unanimous.

10 Business Case for Policy Officer (Astronomy)

Council considered the business case presented by RAS Deputy Executive Director, Dr Robert Massey, for the creation of a Policy Officer (Astronomy) post. This followed the Council's request at the previous meeting to bring forward proposals to increase policy capacity.

The proposed post would add dedicated capacity to meet growing policy demands, particularly in policy development, data gathering, and production of concise, accessible briefing materials for policymakers and the public. The role is intended to complement the work of the existing Policy & Diversity Officer who is already fully engaged with EDI responsibilities, CDAG-related work, and satellite-related issues.

The post is proposed for a three-year fixed term, mirroring the structure of the recently approved Geophysics post.

Estimated costs include salary, on-costs (NI and pension), and the necessary budget for commissioning research and purchasing data. The intention is to recruit at a level comparable to similar roles within the Society. This post is separate from the forthcoming Geophysics project role, which concerns profile, communications, and community support. The new post would focus specifically on astronomy policy, though collaboration with the Policy & Diversity Officer is expected. Council noted the need for clear demarcation of responsibilities and job titles to avoid confusion while still enabling productive overlap and knowledge sharing. Questions were raised about salary level, resourcing, and interaction with existing roles. Dr Massey confirmed these would be defined during the detailed job design process. Council discussed the importance of establishing clear boundaries while enabling a cooperative team structure. Dr Massey proposed recruiting for this post alongside the Geophysics post.

Anticipated timeline includes advertisement in early autumn, allowing time for notice periods. Council agreed that joint recruitment sends a strong message about the Society's commitment to addressing current challenges.

Council agreed to proceed with the creation of the Policy Officer (Astronomy) post.
Approval was unanimous.

ACTION: Dr Massey to proceed with recruitment of a new Policy Officer for astronomy on a full-time, three-year fixed-term contract.

11 Future support for the Eddington Lecture

Council discussed the Society's ongoing support for the Eddington Lecture, following an approach from the Institute of Astronomy (IoA), Cambridge.

There is currently no active agreement in place, though historically the Society has shared financial responsibility for the lecture.

The lecturer delivers the talk first in Cambridge, and then a version of the lecture at one of the Society's A&G Highlights meetings.

Council noted that the lecture has historically been strong, well attended, and offers added value to the Society by providing a named lecture for the A&G Highlights programme.

It was noted that if the Society were commissioning a comparable lecture independently, the costs would be significantly higher. Some members expressed hesitation about subsidising an event tied to a single university.

Council agreed that if support continues, RAS involvement must be clearly recognised. Suggestions included: updating the lecture title to reflect joint branding (e.g., "IoA/RAS Eddington Lecture"), ensuring RAS is acknowledged in publicity and online materials, and including a representative from RAS Council on the IoA selection/organising panel.

Professor Lester emphasised the lecture's history, quality, and accessibility for audiences in the Cambridge area, describing the arrangement as good value for the Society.

Council agreed to continue supporting the Eddington Lecture, subject to:

- Improved recognition of RAS involvement in all publicity and online material.
- Joint branding with IoA where appropriate.
- RAS participation in the selection process for the lecturer.
- The terms being revisited after two years.

12 Eligibility for the Caroline Herschel Prize Lectureship

Council received an update on a question received from a Fellow concerning the eligibility criteria for the Caroline Herschel Prize Lectureship and the Caroline Herschel Medal. Council agreed to await official guidance before considering any change, and approved a statement on the matter for use at the AGM.

13 RAS Fellowships

13.1 Outcome of the 2026 Norman Lockyer Fellowship Scheme

Council received the paper reporting the results of the 2026 Norman Lockyer Fellowship competition. The item was presented for information.

A total of 74 applications were received. Following shortlisting, six candidates were interviewed in March. The panel noted the exceptionally high quality of applicants this year.

Two candidates were selected for fellowships.

13.2 Proposals to update the procedures for Royal Astronomical Society Fellowship Applications

Council revisited the remaining recommendations from the March discussion on proposed changes to fellowship eligibility and administration. Recommendations 1–3 had already been approved and were not reconsidered.

Recommendation 4: Hosting Limits for Institutions

Council considered the updated proposal for clarifying how many fellows a university may host at one time. The current rule permits only one fellow per institution, which inadvertently penalises institutions that host fellows part-time (e.g., at 50%), effectively blocking them from hosting further fellows for six years instead of three. The aim is to streamline the process, avoid disincentivising part-time fellowships, and reduce administrative complexity.

It was proposed to replace the ‘one fellow per institution’ rule with a three-year window starting from the fellowship start date, during which the institution cannot support a new fellowship application.

If a fellowship holder leaves the institution within that window, the institution becomes eligible again. Guidance will explicitly instruct institutions or applicants to contact the Society if special circumstances arise.

A question was raised about whether special exemptions (e.g., caring responsibilities) should be written into the rules. The view was that creating explicit categories would be difficult to define fairly; instead, the Society should retain discretion for exceptional cases, handled individually. The eligibility guidance should invite applicants/institutions to get in touch for discussion of special circumstances.

Council approved Recommendation 4 as revised.

Recommendation 5: Cap on Number of Applications per Institution

Council then discussed how to manage institutions submitting a high volume of applications.

The aim is to reduce excessive demand and ensure fair opportunity across institutions.

Council previously indicated support for introducing a cap, with debate focusing on whether the cap should be applied at the institutional or departmental level.

- 5A – Allow each institution to submit up to four applications.
- 5B – Allow each department or school to submit up to two applications.

Strong arguments were made in favour of the unit-level (5B) approach as it:

- Avoids decisions being taken at institution level, away from the relevant discipline.
- Prevents internal bottlenecks or internal ranking procedures that may deter strong candidates.
- Ensures better representation of ideas and talent across the disciplines.

Council voted in favour of Option 5B (two applications per department/school).

The guidance ("rubric") will be updated accordingly and circulated to heads of department/school. Web pages and documentation will be revised. Council suggested considering—but not committing to—sharing the update via Astronomy & Geophysics if appropriate.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to ensure changes to the application process for RAS Fellowships (including the Sir Norman Lockyer Fellowships) is updated following Council's decision.

14 Operational Items

14.1 Results of the elections to Council

Council elections closed on 7 May, having opened on 17 March. The election was conducted by Mi-Voice.

Turnout:

Voting codes issued: 4,327
Voting codes used: 688
Turnout: 15.9%

Elected Members (4 positions):

Professor Dave Alexander
Professor Peter Gallagher
Dr Olivia Keenan
Dr Emma Woodfield

Not Elected: [Redacted]

Elected Unopposed (3 positions):

Secretary, Astronomy: Dr Sheona Urquhart
Vice President, Astronomy: Professor Jorick Vink
Vice President, Geophysics: Dr Andy Nowacki

Dr Hannah asked whether the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system affected the outcome compared to a first-past-the-post system.

Mr Russell responded that, while the candidates with the highest number of first-preference votes were elected, this does not confirm that the same result would have occurred under first-past-the-post as voters may have behaved differently and the STV process involves multiple stages with fractional vote transfers.

The move to STV was intended to increase participation, but turnout has decreased from approximately 21% to 16%. This turnout remains high compared to similar organisations. This year, voting closed a day early, and candidates were informed of the results before the AGM.

Contributing factors discussed that may have affected the voting include the volume of material to review (statements, CVs, videos), which may deter busy members; and whether a candidate has a video; candidates who do not submit one tend not to be elected.

Mrs Devoil suggested consideration should be given to streamlining candidate materials. Concern was raised that no senior positions were contested this year. Council agreed that encouraging candidates to stand for election should begin well in advance, rather than waiting until October/November.

ACTION: Mr Russell to investigate the historical voter turnout and report back to Council.

ACTION: Professor Lester, Mr Russell and Ms Ellis to investigate whether election materials can be simplified / shortened.

ACTION: Mr Russell to circulate the list of positions coming up for election next year.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to ensure that communications are improved with better explanation of what Council roles involve and why they are worthwhile.

ACTION: Council members to begin encouraging potential candidates now for next year's elections.

15 Executive Director's update

Mr Russell delivered his update, noting that it has been 12 months since he took on his current role. He had prepared a written summary covering the year's developments, which he invited Council members to read at their leisure. Mr Russell chose to highlight several items for particular consideration.

AI and LLM Content Licensing
Mr Russell reminded Council that the Society's journal content is included in licensing agreements

negotiated by Oxford University Press with AI and technology companies, in line with the Society's earlier decision, and that income from this source is not expected to continue at last year's level.

It was suggested that this topic might warrant an article or communication to the membership explaining the reasoning behind the Society's decision to participate. Mr Russell agreed to consider what could be published.

Mr Russell reported on a separate AI-related matter. A research group at the University of Cambridge has been granted permission to use all Society journal articles published prior to 1905, to investigate whether AI models can identify or replicate the kind of conceptual leaps seen in early 20th-century physics. The content will be deleted once the research concludes and will not be made available more broadly or retained by the research group.

NAM 2026
Mr Russell reported that plans to bring the European Astronomical Society annual meeting to the UK had not gone ahead, as a suitable venue was not available on the dates required. The conversation remains open about the UK hosting a future meeting. A possible host for NAM in 2027 has been identified and this opportunity is being pursued at pace.

Discussion touched on the timing of the conference. The dates for NAM 2026 fall during the first week of the school holidays, which presents difficulties for Council members and attendees with school-age children. Mr Russell acknowledged that the timing is not ideal. It was acknowledged that the Society may have limited ability to influence venue availability and that compromises on dates may be necessary.

Professor Miller and Mrs Devoil raised a procedural matter regarding how Council members register for NAM. There was hope expressed that the Society might be able to return to the previous approach of registering Council members directly, depending on the policies of the 2026 host institution.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to communicate the registration process clearly to Council members, ensuring everyone understands what steps they need to take.

16 Revised Terms of Reference for the Publishing Management Committee
Dr Arvind Parmar presented an update on work he has been undertaking with Mr Russell and others to develop a standardised template for the Terms of Reference of all Society committees. The aim is to ensure consistency across committees by standardising elements such as:

- Membership composition
- Length of service and any gap required before reappointment
- Responsibility for taking minutes
- Arrangements for calling and opening meetings
- Quorum requirements

The template provides a common framework, with each committee's specific remit and responsibilities then detailed within that structure.

Two substantive changes were made to the Publishing Management Committee's Terms of Reference, which were the transfer of editorial oversight for Astronomy & Geophysics (A&G) which will no longer fall within the remit of the Publishing Management Committee and instead move to the Membership Committee, on the basis that the magazine is primarily a membership-focused publication rather than a research journal. The Publishing Management Committee will now focus

on the Society's three academic journals. Under the previous Terms of Reference, representatives from Oxford University Press (or whichever publisher holds the contract) were listed as members of the committee. As one of the committee's functions is to review the publisher's performance, under the revised terms publisher representatives will continue to attend meetings by invitation and present as before but will not be voting members of the committee. The revised Terms of Reference are intended to give the committee a more strategic orientation, looking at the future direction of the Society's publications rather than purely operational matters.

The Publishing Management Committee has considered the proposed changes and is content with them.

Dr Peel asked how members are selected to the committee. The Publishing Management Committee membership is largely composed of ex officio members - individuals who serve because of another position they hold (such as journal editors). Additional members are co-opted by the chair. The reference to "elected members" in the document was acknowledged as an artefact of the standardisation process and potentially confusing.

It was agreed that the wording should be reviewed to ensure it accurately reflects how the committee's membership is constituted.

Post meeting note: membership of the Publishing Management Committee can include “Up to two independent individuals, who need not be members of the Society, with expertise in scholarly journal publishing elected by the Committee and ratified by Council.” It is these positions that are referred to as “elected members”.

Council approved the updated Terms of Reference for the Publishing Management Committee.

17 Revised Terms of Reference for the Finance Committee

The Finance Committee met approximately two weeks after the Publishing Management Committee and reviewed its own draft terms of reference, based on the same standardised template. The committee was content with the proposed document.

It was noted that the Finance Committee review was largely an exercise in codifying existing practice, rather than changing the committee's purpose - in contrast to the more substantive changes made to the Publishing Management Committee's remit.

The Finance Committee raised two points that had not been explicitly addressed in the original template. Both were accepted as applicable to all committees and have been incorporated into the template going forward:

Chair absence: A paragraph was added specifying what happens if the Chair is unavailable for a meeting. The arrangement mirrors that used for Council itself: the members present would elect someone to chair that meeting. This provision will apply to all committees.

Working between meetings: A bullet point was added noting that committees may conduct business by email or other methods between formal meetings. This reflects existing practice and again applies across all committees.

It was clarified that for appointments to the Finance Committee, an open call is issued to all members inviting expressions of interest. Existing Committee members then select the most appropriate candidates from among them. The term "elected" in the Terms of Reference therefore refers to selection by the Committee from among applicants, rather than a ballot of the wider membership.

Council approved the updated Terms of Reference for the Finance Committee.

18 Michael Penston Thesis Prize 2025

Professor Crowther presented the Astro Thesis Prize report. He confirmed that Council members should have received the paper in advance outlining the panel membership he assembled this year.

The prize received 20 nominations, which Professor Crowther noted represented a diverse range of institutions and a reasonable gender balance.

After deliberation, the panel had selected:

Winner: Thomas Bancroft (University of Birmingham) — for work on exoplanets, specifically circumbinary exoplanets

Runner-up: Emily Sheridan Hertig (University of Cambridge) — for work on cosmic inflation

Professor Crowther acknowledged that, as previous panel chairs have found, selecting a winner from a strong field is a challenging task.

The panel felt that five of the twenty nominations were particularly strong cases, any of which could reasonably have been selected as a winner or runner-up. Given that only one winner and one runner-up can be awarded, the panel expressed a desire to recognise the three additional outstanding candidates with a "highly commended" designation.

Professor Crowther noted that this is non-standard practice for the Royal Astronomical Society. He therefore raised the proposal at the Awards Review Group meeting held a couple of weeks prior. The proposal received support from other members of that group, but the final decision rests with the Council.

It was confirmed that the highly commended designation would not incur any additional cost. Professor Wild noted that some other awards did not receive enough nominations to acknowledge highly commended candidates and asked whether this may appear inconsistent. However, it was felt this was not a significant concern. Different prizes attract different numbers and strengths of nominations, and it is reasonable that highly commended recognition would apply only where the field warrants it.

Professor Crowther mentioned that he had spoken with Professor Griffin who chaired the panel the previous year and it was confirmed that there had similarly been several strong candidates who could have won, and he would have liked the option to recognise additional candidates but it was not available at the time.

Professor Lockwood observed that while a single clear winner does emerge in some years, it is common to have several candidates of sufficient quality to merit recognition. The key is not to overuse the category, but where genuinely strong candidates exist, this provides a sensible way to acknowledge them.

Council approved the introduction of a highly commended category for the Michael Penston Thesis Prize, allowing the three additional strong candidates to be recognised in publicity relating to this year's prize.

ACTION: The Awards and Grants Officer to implement highly commended recognition for the relevant Michael Penston Thesis Prize candidates.

19 Patricia Tomkins Thesis Prize 2025

Ms Ellis presented the Patricia Tomkins Thesis Prize, noting that the nomination numbers for this prize have been consistently low and asked Council for suggestions on how to increase engagement.

The prize is focused on instrumentation and hardware development in astronomy and geophysics. Council members noted that this is inherently a narrower field than broader astronomy or geophysics research, which limits the pool of potential candidates.

One suggestion was to slightly expand the eligibility requirements to include people who may not currently consider themselves candidates. Professor Lester noted that the topic of the prize was deliberately chosen by its founder, and that any changes to the criteria would need to be discussed with her first.

Professor Lockwood raised the possibility of making the prize better known in industry, where many early career people work on instrumentation development. However, it was noted that these individuals typically are not completing a thesis, which is currently a requirement.

Professor Smith suggested that removing the word “thesis” from the prize criteria might be the most effective change. The prize could instead be awarded to “an early career person developing instrumentation”, which would open it to those working in industry who are not pursuing academic qualifications. This was seen as a potentially promising approach, though Council acknowledged that thought would need to be given to what evidence or materials candidates would be expected to submit in place of a thesis.

Professor Lockwood noted that while emails about prizes are sent to all fellows, people often don't remember receiving them. It was suggested that the Society needs better points of contact at each institution, on both the astronomy and geophysics sides, who could serve as regular reminders about prize opportunities.

Council agreed that action is needed to address the low nomination numbers for this prize, but recognised that working through the details was not possible in the time available. The matter will be brought back to a future Council meeting for further discussion.

ACTION: Ms Ellis to bring an agenda item on encouraging nominations to the Patricia Tomkins Thesis Prize to a future meeting of Council.

Professor Hammond noted that there was no report on the Keith Runcorn Prize. Professor Miller confirmed that a report had been submitted and would be circulated. The Prize was awarded to Dr Hannah Sanderson (University of Oxford) for her PhD thesis titled “Unlocking planetesimal histories using refined thermal evolution and dynamo generation models" and the runner-up prize awarded to Dr Joanna Egan (Open University) for her PhD thesis titled "Optical properties of Venusian clouds".

ACTION: Professor Miller’s report on the Keith Runcorn Prize to be circulated to Council.

Professor Crowther and Professor Eales noted the importance of having points of contact for both astronomy and geophysics so that we can ensure that the Society’s activities are promoted at institutions where the Society has members.

ACTION: Mr Russell and Ms Ellis to investigate institutional points of contact as part of a review of membership communications.

20 Membership

20.1 Membership report

Ms Ellis presented the membership report, which had been circulated to Council in advance. The key figures are:

- 3 members have sadly passed away since the last meeting
- 1 resignation
- 5 reinstatements

Overall, membership numbers remain stable compared to the previous period.

Professor Eales asked if people registering for NAM have an opportunity to join the Society at that point. Ms Ellis confirmed that there is an opportunity to apply to join during NAM registration. Student applicants receive the student membership deal, though they are not immediately registered as members, this is handled as a commitment to apply, with the formal process completed subsequently.

Professor Wild raised the matter of a membership application that had been deferred at the previous meeting. The further information had been received and the individual will be admitted to membership in this cycle.

20.2 New Fellows for approval

53 people were proposed for membership

3 applications processed through Route 2 (nomination route)

42 out of 53 (79%) are students (of those that gave us their occupation), 52 out of 53 (98%) are based in the UK, and 19 out of 53 (36%) are women (of those that gave us their sex).

All 53 candidates were unanimously approved by the Council.

21 Policy

STFC cuts response - update

Dr Massey provided an update on developments regarding STFC (Science and Technology Facilities Council) funding. The prospect of cuts remains very real, with no indication that astronomy will be protected from the pressures affecting STFC's budget.

A town hall meeting was held approximately a week prior to the Council meeting, with nearly 300 people attending virtually, an encouraging level of engagement from the community. Dr Massey confirmed he had circulated a summary to Council.

The Society has been working closely with Professor Catherine Heymans, Astronomer Royal for Scotland, on advocacy efforts, and continues to seek information from STFC on its finances.

ACTION: Dr Massey to continue to pursue information on STFC finances.

The Society's position is that the impact of the proposed cuts extends well beyond science itself to include university departments. A letter is being prepared jointly with the Institute of Physics (IOP), calling for a broad impact assessment of the proposed cuts.

ACTION: Dr Massey to finalise joint letter calling for a thorough impact assessment of the proposed cuts with IOP and send to Lord Vallance.

Professor Wild noted that a core task force group has been formed and is working to organise an event in Westminster.

ACTION: Dr Massey to finalise arrangements for a parliamentary event at Westminster.

22 Minutes of the Publishing Management Committee meeting held on 8 April 2026
The minutes of the Publishing Management Committee meeting held on 8 April 2026 were received for information (paper C-2026-46, page 157 of the Council papers).

The minutes were noted.

23 Minutes of the Library Committee meeting held on 21 October 2025
The minutes of the Library Committee meeting held on 21 October 2025 were received for information (paper C-2026-47, page 164 of the Council papers).

The minutes were noted.

Any other business and date of next meeting

24 Any other business

Open Letter Regarding Bursaries

The Chair advised Council that an open letter concerning bursaries for summer placements had been received, arriving shortly before the start of the meeting and before the Chair was due to step down as President. The Chair confirmed that a brief holding reply had been sent, noting that Council did not have sufficient time before the meeting to consider the letter's contents.

It was noted that the matter would be considered by Council through the relevant committee in the usual way.

Thanks to Outgoing Members of Council

The Chair formally thanked the following outgoing members of Council for their service and contribution:

Matt Griffin

Caroline Smith

Imogen Gingell

Derek Ward-Thompson

Ashley Spindler

Alan Cayless

It was noted that Sheona Urquhart will be re-elected unopposed at the forthcoming AGM and will therefore continue Council for a second term.

Thanks to the outgoing President

On behalf of Council Mr Russell thanked Professor Lockwood for his two years of service as President. He stated that it had been a genuine pleasure to work alongside Professor Lockwood, expressed appreciation for the significant time and support he had given during his first year and paid tribute to Professor Lockwood's dedication to the role.

25 Date of next meeting

The next meeting of Council will take place on Thursday 23 July 2026 at the University of Birmingham during NAM 2026. It was noted that both Mr Russell and Dr Massey will likely be absent from this meeting.

It is proposed that the focus of the July meeting will be feeding into the architect's design planning for the renovations to Burlington House.