



*Advancing  
Astronomy and  
Geophysics*

## **ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY**

Burlington House, Piccadilly  
London W1J 0BQ, UK

T: 020 7734 4582/ 3307

F: 020 7494 0166

Info@ras.org.uk

www.ras.org.uk

Registered Charity 226545

### **AGENDA ITEM 2**

#### **ATTACHMENT C(2008/12) 2/1**

### **MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING 9 OCTOBER 2008 AT 1030 IN THE COUNCIL ROOM**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

**PRESENT:** Professor A.C. Fabian (President), Professor M.E. Bailey, Professor A.M. Cruise, Professor M.A. Hapgood (Vice-Presidents), Professor P.G. Murdin (Treasurer), Dr H.J. Walker, Professor M.A. Barstow and Dr I.A. Crawford (secretaries), Dr A.J. Ball, Dr R.J. Barber, Dr P.K. Browning, Professor M.G. Edmunds, Dr L. Fletcher, Professor B.K. Gibson, Professor J.H. Hough, Professor R. Ivison, Professor V. Nakariakov, and Dr J.A. Wild.

**IN ATTENDANCE:** David Elliott and Robert Massey

**APOLOGIES:** Dr J Greaves; Professor I Howarth; Dr I. Corbett

#### **2. MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of 18 July 2008 were corrected to show Dr Browning among the 'apologies' (only) before being approved and signed.

#### **3. MATTERS ARISING**

**3.1** The Geophysical Secretary reported that the BGA, in principle, had agreed to the proposal that it should become a committee of the Society but that this was conditional on the outcome of discussions about its continued relationship with the Geological Society.

**3.2** The Executive Secretary reported that 'Oxford Economics' had been asked to re-submit its proposal for a study of 'The economic benefits of fundamental research in physics' given the doubts raised by members of the project steering group about the viability of its proposed methodology.

#### **4. PRESIDENT'S BUSINESS**

**4.1** The President informed Council that he had congratulated Lord Drayson on his appointment as Minister for Science and Innovation and would send the Society's good wishes to his predecessor, Ian Pearson, who had been promoted to the key position of Economic Secretary in the Treasury.

**4.2** The President summarised the main findings of the Wakeham Review of the Health of Physics and the Society's positive response which had been posted on the web site and issued as a press release. This followed a personal briefing by Professor Wakeham attended by Professor Ian Diamond, Chair of RCUK. In particular he highlighted 4 recommendations of particular importance to the Society viz that:

- a) STFC be required at each CSR to bid for and allocate specific funds to former PPARC facilities and grant funding together;
- b) membership of STFC's Council be broadened to include more of the stakeholders in the science activity at the highest level, and to redress the balance between executive presence and non-executive oversight;
- c) the Director General of Science and Research (DGSR) would benefit from advice from a small, but well informed advisory group from outside DIUS during the CSR allocation process to ensure there are no unintended consequences;
- d) responsibility be transferred to the Natural Environment Research Council for those parts of solar terrestrial physics research which are most relevant to the NERC mission. That transfer should be accompanied by sufficient funds to enable NERC to administer and support the current level of research.

Professor Barstow, a member of the Review team, added that Professor Wakeham had modified his initial concern that astronomy accounted for a disproportionate share of the research funds of physics departments in the light of the evidence demonstrating the contribution of astrophysics to many of the subject's sub-disciplines.

In relation to para d) it was agreed that the STP community would provide the Society with detailed advice on the line to take. Regarding b) it was noted that RCUK had agreed to increase the number of scientists on the Science Council by 2, which, though inadequate, was welcomed. Finally it was noted that the advisory group recommended at c) would need exceptional skills to discharge its remit.

**4.3** The President laid on the table a summary of the responses so far received from members of Council for possible inclusion in the Society's submission to the external organisational review of STFC being undertaken by Dr David Grant. He undertook to produce a further draft for circulation to the membership. The final version was required by 24 October 2008. Council agreed that this was an important opportunity to redefine the relationship between STFC and the community as well as to improve its operational effectiveness.

**4.4** The President reported on the very positive meeting he and the Policy Officer had had with the Conservative Shadow Science Minister, Adam Afriye, who had spoken warmly about the importance of basic research. Council noted that we already had good relations with the Liberal Democrat Chair of the IUSS Committee, Phil Willis.

**4.5** Finally, the President informed Council that a letter would be published in 'Nature' commenting on the Wakeham Review and challenging the assertions of the former chief

scientist, Sir David King, that resources should be moved from curiosity based research, including space research, into more immediate challenges, especially climate change.

## **5. POLICY & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

**5.1** The Policy Officer summarised the results of what was intended to be the first of an annual series of ‘Survey of Astronomy Courses’ to which there had been a patchy response from astronomy departments (Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham being notable omissions). Information on career destinations of graduates was particularly sparse and it was suggested that approaches should be made to careers services and the Institute of Physics; in addition the Society should not rule out commissioning independent research to obtain data. In the meantime it was agreed to publish the results, disaggregating the Open University’s which would otherwise distort them, together with a health warning about their limitations.

**5.2** The Policy Officer drew the attention of Council to the submission on Geo-Engineering to the IUSS Committee Review of Engineering made in the joint names of the Society, BGA and IoP.

**5.3** Council noted the situation report on preparations for IYA 2009. It also noted with satisfaction that the Society had paid a modest sum to obtain prime positions at the 3 major political party conferences where volunteers were able to publicise IYA 2009 through leafleting and by offering delegates observation slots on solarscopes.

**5.4** The Executive Secretary outlined the background to a letter from the President of the Science Council, of which the Society is a corporate member, seeking support for the National Young Scientists and Engineers Fair to be held at the QE2 Conference Centre in March 2009. This will bring together, for greater impact, prize winners and exhibits from a large number of competitions including the BA’s CREST Awards. It was agreed that, subject to the Executive Secretary receiving more detailed information a modest sum (of the order of £500-£1,000) should be offered to the organisers since it was important for the Society to be involved in what promised to be a high profile event. Additionally, the services of fellows as judges should be offered. Finally, it was also agreed to invite the Science Council’s Chief Executive to a future meeting of Council to give a short presentation about the work of the organisation.

## **6. ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE**

**6.1** The President summarised the principal issues arising from the Strategic Away Day held on 29 and 30 September at Cumberland Lodge. Council discussed 2 of them in particular:

- a) paying the President an honorarium, or compensating his/her institution for time spent on Society business;
- b) convening meetings of astronomy research groups to facilitate community cohesion and provide a platform for exchanges with policy makers and funders.

While officers and relevant committees will look at all the issues raised at Cumberland Lodge the following topics were ‘adopted’ by certain members of Council who will bring considered proposals to a future meeting:

- relations with NERC (Professor Hapgood)

- education outreach - 'what everyone should know about A&G' (Dr Fletcher)
- honoraria (Dr Barber)
- membership (Professor Gibson)
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**6.2** The Executive Secretary spoke to the paper on Awards & Honours. Council agreed that the restriction of the right to make nominations for Society awards to fellows served no useful purpose since there was no such constraint on the field of nominees; indeed, removing this might encourage more proposals. Council also agreed that the membership should be encouraged to seek Society support to strengthen nominations for national honours by inviting them to supply the appropriate information on the basis of which Council, on the advice of the awards committees, would decide, or otherwise, to progress them in its name.

**6.3** Council approved the appointment of the following editors: MNRAS Professor Andy Taylor; GJI Professor Michel Diament.

**6.4** Professor Cruise, chair of the International Committee gave a brief report on its first meeting which was attended by 2 overseas based members as well as guest speakers. The Committee agreed to produce guidelines to assist individuals wishing to engage in capacity building in developing countries under the aegis of the RAS. It was also noted that the surest way of recruiting overseas members was by building on their association with this country, often during the early stages of their careers. It was agreed that this and other membership related issues (including whether a premium should be added to the contributions of fellows who benefited from having their IAU membership fee paid by the Society) would be remitted to the membership committee for further consideration. Professor Cruise indicated that geophysics would form one of the 2 main agenda items at the next meeting and welcomed suggestions for the other.

**6.5** Council noted that, for the first time, the Society had participated with considerable success in 'Open House' which affords Londoners an opportunity to better appreciate their built environment.

## **7. FINANCE**

**7.1** The Treasurer distributed a report on the financial position in the light of the turbulence in the banking and related sectors and the possibility of a global recession. Overall, the reserves had weakened considerably during 2008 losing 14% of market value (though during the same period the FTSE-100 had fallen by no less than 29 %). In addition the value of the Defined Benefit Pension Scheme had declined 9.5% while the Stakeholder Scheme would probably require topping up. Although the general reserves remained well above the minimum £2.5M, which Council in December 2003 had agreed was a prudent level, the possibility of having to fund additional costs over the next three years of the order of £250,000 made it unwise to enter into any avoidable expenditure since no-one could yet see when or where the turbulence would stabilise. Also, given the emerging consensus that there would be a global recession, it was possible that income would fall; certainly it was unlikely that there would be significant additional income in this period.

Given these surprising developments, this, of course, meant that the Treasurer had reversed the opinion that he had held for a few years and last expressed at the 2008 AGM that there was capacity to undertake new projects to the value of, say, £0.5m.

Council fully supported that conclusion.

The Society's investments were held in Newton Investment Managers (a division of the Bank of New York Mellon, and through BNYM in Nord Landesbank, BNY Intl, RBS and Bank of Montreal) and in Scottish Life. In all cases the assets were in the Society's name or nominee accounts and the stock market investments were ring fenced against creditors. Council noted that the Treasurer had been in recent contact with Newton and agreed that RAS funds were invested on criteria which took full account of suitability and diversification. That said, were any of these banks to fail, the Society's cash assets would be covered only by compensation schemes.

Turning to daily banking arrangements Council was reminded that some £0.75m was held in cash deposits in the National Westminster Bank. As its vulnerability, as at 9 October 2008, appeared to be greater than some other High St banks, including and especially HSBC, after a full discussion, it was agreed to open a HSBC account, as soon as possible, and transfer to it some £0.5m of the cash holdings. It was not felt, though, that the current level of risk justified incurring the transactional costs of closing the NatWest account used for routine banking services, although this might emerge as sensible at some later time. Council noted that market conditions were in a flux, needed to be monitored continuously and that the Society's banking and investment arrangements should be kept under review, including the option of opening additional accounts to reduce exposure to any one bank failing.

Council also requested that the Operations Plan, a spreadsheet prepared as a tool for the Treasurer and the Finance Committee, which summarised the operational plans for the past and immediate future years, should be regularly up-dated by the Treasurer and presented in its latest state at each Council meeting. This was because the financial data included with the 'officers reports' were not judged sufficient to gauge the health of the Society's finances. The Treasurer undertook to comply as best he could, though he reminded Council that this was not a trivial matter and that his was not a full-time position!

Council members, mindful of their individual and collective responsibilities as trustees of the Society, went on to discuss the desirability of added protection through trustee indemnity insurance. The Executive Secretary informed Council that the advice of the Charity Commission was that as long as a trustee used the same diligence and care administering the property of a charity as they would use in the management of their own affairs they were unlikely personally to be at risk. That said, the Treasurer added that should trustees find themselves facing legal pursuit, he would rather that their defence was in the hands of an insurance company. He was actively investigating relevant indemnity policies following advice relating to trustee liability, particularly given their vulnerability for law suits relating to employees and to the property that the Society occupied. He hoped to have made suitable arrangements before the next meeting.

**7.2** The Senior Secretary reported that the RAS had been asked by the Daphne Jackson Trust for support of its work which provides half-time Fellowships for returners of both genders, who have had a career break of at least two years. This had been considered by the Committee for Women in Astronomy and Geophysics which had recommended that the RAS should sponsor one Fellowship at a typical cost of £47500 over two years. Dr Walker explained that at this stage she could not present a detailed proposal to Council since it would be *sui generis* i.e. costs could be estimated only when a suitable candidate in astronomy or geophysics had been identified and after s/he had negotiated a research position with a host

institution. Council expressed considerable interest in being associated with this scheme but, given the preceding discussion, felt that this was not the time to take on *any* avoidable commitments. Instead the Committee for Women in Astronomy and Geophysics was asked to bring forward a proposal when the financial situation had stabilised.

## **8. OTHER**

**8.1** The Executive Secretary tabled the draft letter due to be sent to the membership outlining the election process for the vacancies expected on Council following the 2009 AGM. He noted that while it had been the custom for this letter to indicate that Council intended to make nominations for the positions of Vice-President (and Officers, though no officer vacancies arose in 2009) the bye-laws did not require this and that not to do so might encourage nominations from the general membership. Council supported this more democratic procedure noting that, in the event of insufficient nominations or under-representation of minorities, the bye-laws allowed it to add nominees to the balloting list.

**8.2** Council approved the following Candidates for Election to Fellowship listed in OR/07/08, OR/08/08, OR/09/07 & OR/10/08 and posted on the RAS web site.

Aderin	Margaret
Andrews	David J.
Baldry	Ivan
Barnes	Rebecca
Boyle	Alison
Chiao	Leroy
Cordey	Ralph
Dale	Horace A.
Danson	Edwin F.S.
Dobek	Gerald O.
Galloway	Ross
Gantry	Bret
Ghag	Chamkaur
Gilmour	John
Gronstal	Aaron L.
Guymer	Gemma
Jones	Catherine
Lederman	Eli
Leece	Geoffrey
Little	Trevor
Natarajan	Priyamvada
Owen	Gareth
Ryder	Jacqueline
Savini	Giorgio
Stromme	Anja
Swinscoe	David J.
Tipper	David
Vermeersen	Bert
Voss	Sandra
Walsh	Andrew
Wills	Danielle Elizabeth
Wilson	Graham Philip

**8.3** The Minutes of the A&G Meeting of 9<sup>th</sup> May 2008 were approved and signed

**The meeting rose at 1650**

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A.C. Fabian  
President

11<sup>th</sup> December 2008