



November 2023

Dear Fellow,

As we approach the end of 2023, I am writing to keep you informed about some of the work that is carried out by the Society on your behalf.

I am pleased to say, that after a rigorous tendering exercise, we chose to renew our contract with Oxford University Press from the end of this year. We are continuing our successful partnership at a critical time in the evolution of our journals, when the research and publishing landscape is changing fast. After careful consideration, RAS Council, advised by our publisher, decided that our journals will transition to full open access from January 2024. The decision has been taken to ensure their sustainability and compliance with open access policy mandates in the long term. Removing barriers to access is a major step towards openness, transparency and reproducibility, accelerating scientific discovery and increasing the impact of research. This is an exciting phase in the journals' history – obviously not without its challenges, but we feel confident that we can work well with Oxford University Press to iron out transitional problems.

As the leading UK learned society representing astronomy and geophysics, it is our priority to provide a welcoming, interesting, and inclusive environment for all our members. The RAS has always been run for, and by, you. The RAS speaks for the professions of astronomy and geophysics in multiple ways including regular input to Government inquiries, for example on the impact of large satellite constellations in the UK, Europe and further afield. The RAS also exists to promote cooperation and collaboration between its members of all ages and backgrounds.

Among other initiatives, Council has resolved to carry out a fundamental review of the content and form of the Society's website and its associated communications, starting early in the New Year. We will prioritise implementing the revisions required, since we acknowledge that this is such an important aspect of both our public image and our interaction with our members.

The Society continues to organise and supports an excellent programme of scientific meetings from October through to May on the second Friday of each month, bringing a wide range of outstanding speakers to keep you in touch with developments in your fields of interest. The hybrid format is now a permanent feature of these meetings. We have now changed the name of our *Ordinary* meetings to *A and G Highlights*, which we feel better describes the nature of these meetings. The National Astronomy Meeting in Cardiff this year was a great success – the biggest ever NAM – and we look forward to the 2024 event in Hull.

The last few years have been difficult for our community and for people in general. We are still experiencing a very tough financial period which will have an impact on many of you. I want to draw your attention to the resolutions (see appendix) that were passed at our AGM in May. These resolutions were designed to at least be some help to our community through the difficulties they may be facing. I also mention that the Society has a fund, the Gerald Merton Fund, to help Fellows who find themselves unable to pay all or some of their membership fees for the year, due to financial difficulty. Requests to the Fund are confidential and approved by the Treasurer. Requests can be sent to membership@ras.ac.uk. If you wish to help others who are in financial difficulty by donating to this fund, please get in touch with the Membership Officer either by email or phone (+44 (0)7516 030497) and this will be arranged for you.

I also want to let you know that we have listened to your feedback that the constraint on free room bookings for Fellows being free only if they were made no more than three months in advance, was unnecessarily restrictive. We are removing that restriction. Fellows may now book rooms as far in advance as they wish. Of course it helps our finances (and our ability to do useful things!) if, where appropriate and possible, external funding can be obtained for room hire.

An ongoing priority for us continues to be securing our long-term residency in Burlington House. We continue to engage with government ministers and civil servants on the terms of our lease. Recently these discussions have been quite constructive. I dearly hope our negotiations will resolve favourably in the coming months, but we are formulating alternative plans to ensure the Society's future is secure whatever the result.

In order to continue promoting our science through the various activities described here, and to maintain and extend the positive influence of our Society within Government, we need your support by continuing in membership, and by participating in the activities of the Society. Please consider standing for election to Council - there are a number of roles up for nomination this year.

Finally, I would like to remind you that making a bequest to the Society in your will is also a simple and effective way of enabling the RAS to continue its important activities. The Society is a charity and so any bequest is free of inheritance tax. My hope is to see our community thrive and grow, so that our successors can continue to benefit from the scientific and educational activities of the Royal Astronomical Society well into the future.

Yours faithfully,

Prof. Mike Edmunds, RAS President

Appendix

Changes that have been made to byelaws and membership conditions

Change 1

To offer monthly direct debit payment options from 2024 (the extent of this for 2024 may be limited by temporary software systems and logistics constraints).

Background to Change 2

We wish to introduce this in order to assist Fellows who may have parental leave, extended sick leave, carer responsibilities or periods of unemployment

Change 2

To permit RAS Fellows to suspend membership for single complete calendar years (separately or consecutively) for up to six years. To suspend membership will mean that there are no membership benefits, no voting rights, and no accrued years of membership during the period of suspension.

Background to Change 3

We wish to introduce this to assist PhD students who are no longer funded, where membership of the Society will be useful for networking and finding their next post

Change 3

To extend the student rate for an additional year after PhD funding has ended if the student is not in paid relevant employment.

Background to Change 4

Currently, Fellows whose membership has lapsed can apply for reinstatement within three years, but are required to pay for the years they have missed in order to have continuous membership. This is likely to act as a barrier to those who wish to rejoin.

As a consequence Byelaw 39 is amended so that a lapsed membership within 15 years of pensionable age does not stop that member from applying for a concessionary rate provided that they have a total of 15 full years of membership:

Change 4

If a Fellow has resigned in good standing, without owing the society money, to allow reinstatement within three years with no penalty or need to make up years in between; and consequent change to the text within Byelaw 39 from ‘the previous fifteen years of membership to ‘a total of fifteen years of full years of membership.’

REVISED BYELAW 39. A Fellow who has attained state pensionable age and who has paid Membership Subscriptions for a total of fifteen years of full membership shall be eligible, upon application to the Treasurer in writing, for a concessionary rate of Membership Subscription, decided under previous regulations. Notwithstanding this provision, Fellows who attained the age of 65 before 1st January 2003, and who had validly elected under a previous Bye-law for complete exemption from paying Membership Subscriptions, shall retain that privilege.