

## Notes from Astronomy Forum, 1 November 2023

The Astronomy Forum took place as a virtual meeting on Zoom, hosted by the Royal Astronomical Society.

Attendees from the RAS: Prof. Mike Edmunds (Chair) and Dr Robert Massey (Deputy Executive Director)

Attendees from STFC: Prof. Mark Thomson, Dr Jenny Hiscock

UK Space Agency: Dr Caroline Harper

### Report from the Science and Technology Facilities Council (Prof. Mark Thomson)

MT gave a [presentation](#) covering general updates from STFC, funding and astronomy highlights.

#### Questions from Forum members:

*Can we go back to bugbear of a long time – the dual key – will the roadmap be considering UK science interest in current and new space facilities?*

MT: Engagement between senior leadership teams of STFC and UKSA is now very strong. We are having discussions on how we feed in space-based missions into our Science Board, including the possible presence of UKSA representation as an observer. Really good question, but want to emphasise that working together better than it has been at any time previously.

*Congratulations on the increase in funding with the consolidated grants, something we can all applaud. (Was) difficult to engage [between STFC and UKSA] on Science Board.*

CH: To follow on from this, my perception is that interaction and communication flow [between UKSA and STFC] is really good, we would be delighted to have representation on Science Board, we do have representation from STFC on Science Programme Advisory Committee. We do make sure that we're joined up in that regard.

*Dual key issue came up from Fellows as a point for our submission to the Commons SIT Committee inquiry into Astronomy. Also note point about inflation and managing that, and erosion of settlement even if grows in cash terms. Note too that recent actions from Secretary of State for SIT re EDI has not been well received.*

MT: Does not change STFC commitment to EDI, this is a complex example that covers a number of areas, you will have seen the letters from the Secretary of State and the response from the CEO of UKRI.

*Assume that reconstruction of Science Board will supersede Astronomy Advisory Panel which had people from more junior career stages – would be interested to hear about size and composition of new PPAN board. Also, should we see the Commons SIT inquiry an opportunity or a threat?*

MT: Science Board will have six astronomers, six particle physicists, two from nuclear physics, two from particle astrophysics, chair, deputy chair. Two astronomy advisory panels still exist, will provide input into Science Board for review. Not sure about background into SIT inquiry, I see it as more of an opportunity than a threat.

ME requested comment from RM, and on dark sky and satellite constellation work of RAS.

RM: Inquiry seems to be motivated by particular interests of some Committee MPs, who haven't looked at astronomy for a long time, and if members expect to be leaving parliament (through retirement, not necessarily anticipated election result) then they wanted to look at this while they were in Parliament. I don't see this as a threat either, but a chance to speak about the strengths of the field and flag issues of concern. Whether MPs agree with us is their prerogative. Committee doesn't have power as such, but makes recommendations and Government has to respond to those. RAS has put in a substantial contribution, informed by astronomical community, and also included preliminary results from our demographic survey. We should welcome this interest from MPs.

Other areas of RAS policy work include parliamentary debates and question on the issue of dark skies, Society hosts secretariat for APPG for Dark Skies, can invite speakers, connect us with MPs and peers.

On large satellite constellations, RAS Working Groups are very good for consultations, talk to UKSA for e.g. UK position at UN COPUOS highlighting impact on optical and radio astronomy. Also grateful for UK support for this issue at G7 Science and Technology Ministerial in Sendai in July. RAS is a contributing member of the IAU Centre for the Protection of the Dark and Quiet Sky from Satellite Constellation Interference (CPS), sits in its Policy Hub. Would welcome hearing (more) from community on this. European Astronomical Society (with RAS input) also dealing with this at European level, and European Commission is engaged.

### **Report from the UK Space Agency (Dr Caroline Harper)**

CH set out how Axiom (potential UK private space flight) could fuel public interest in spaceflight, particularly interested too in creating videos of early career scientists, found video of Naomi Rowe-Gurney on JWST and her career choices and challenges inspiring, as did UKSA senior leadership team. Also gearing up for Spending Review and UK ambition to become science and technology superpower, pushing for appropriate levels of funding for that. Keen to see space science inspire people in same way as astronauts, would like dedicated outreach support for that. Interested in collaborating with RAS on this.

On dark skies, some UKSA staff involved with UN COPUOS, will ensure new members of staff are connected to RAS. CH agreed that SIT Committee inquiry is positive, reflects interest of MPs.

CH then gave a [presentation](#) updating the Forum on the ESA Science Programme and the work of the UK Space Agency.

Questions from Forum members:

*RAS put in a short response to the new EU Space Law. Is UKSA plugged into this given the impact it could have on space partnerships?*

CH: Am not sure, will check with policy team.

*Great to hear comments on (NASA / UK) bilateral, very successful so far, if we can get funding in place that would be a tremendous boost, along with timescale.*

CH: We'll do our best – we'll be looking to community for inputs on this, will reach out to project teams, to help write Spending Review case. Nicky Fox (NASA) is keen on programme too, changing the way the UK is viewed as a partner, CSA, JAXA, ISRO enthusiastic as well.

*You didn't mention China, also keen, but would have to be cautious.*

CH: If proposal came in involving China, would have to take it to DSIT and FCDO and take their steer on how this would be applicable given foreign policy context.

**Any other business**

There were no other items of business.