



**Minutes of the Council Meeting held on
11.00 – 15.00, Friday 11 October 2024, Council Room, Burlington House, and
via Teams**

1. INTRODUCTION

Attendance

PRESENT:

Prof Mike Lockwood (MLO); President and Chair (G)
Prof Arvind Parmar (AP); Treasurer (A/G)
Dr Matt Middleton (MM); Vice President, (A) - Online
Prof Matthew Griffin (MG); Vice President, (A)
Prof Andrew Curtis (ACU) Vice president (G)
Prof Mark Lester (MLE); Senior Secretary (G)
Dr Sheona Urquhart (SU); Secretary (A)
Prof James Hammond (JH) Secretary (G)
Prof Silvia Zane (SZ) (A)
Prof Stephen Eales (SE) (A)
Mrs Patricia Tomkins (PT;) (A)
Dr Olivia Keenan (OK); (A)
Dr Imogen Gingell (IG) (G) - Online
Dr Ashley Spindler (AS) (A) - Online
Dr Alan Cayless (ACA) (A) - Online
Prof Steve Miller (SM) (G) - Online
Dr Chrysa Avdellidou (CA) (G) - Online
Dr Andrew Young (AY) (A) - Online
Dr Iain Hannah (IH) (G) - Online

APOLOGIES:

Prof Caroline Smith (CLS) Vice president (G)
Prof Derek Ward Thompson (DWT) (A)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr Philip Diamond (PD), Executive Director
Dr Robert Massey, (RM) Deputy Executive Director and Policy
Mr Audie Muller (AM), Head of Operations

2. MINUTES & MATTERS ARISING

2.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 17 July 2024, were approved

Action: AM to amend 3.1 to read 'aimed at card payers'.

Action: AM to amend 3.3 to read 'good' instead of 'could'.

2.2 Action Status Report, was received by Council.

Regarding action 6.3 RM to look at the possibilities of organising a parliamentary day. RM confirmed this is underway and that they are in the process of contacting MP's.

Regarding 3.3 Planning for Terrestrial reaction to the detection of Extraterrestrial Life, RM recently attended a conference in Leiden, Netherlands and commented that a series of protocols would be needed with collaboration between several institutions for discovery research results from the search for life beyond Earth, to provide a co-ordinated response. It was suggested that the RAS should be part of this collaboration.

3. PRESIDENT'S BUSINESS

3.1 x (formerly known as Twitter)

Council discussed re-evaluating their relationship with X due to the recent controversies and challenges. Many responses from Council highlighted a growing concern over the platform's content moderation and the impact of Musk's leadership on its reputation.

It was acknowledged that X has been in the spotlight recently due to various controversies and regulatory challenges. However, SpaceX continues to make significant strides in space exploration and this complicates the issue for RAS

MLO expressed that Council did not want to hinder social media activities within the RAS by withdrawing from X, and in general it was agreed that we should continue to monitor our position.

3.2 NASA International Observe the Moon Night

MLO wanted to express his thanks and gratitude to the recent NASA International Observe the Moon Night at University of Reading, where 350 people attended. Dr. James O'Donoghue, Associate Professor in Planetary Astronomy and Professor Chris Scott, Professor in Space and Atmospheric Physics were thanked. A special thank you went to Lucinda Offer, Education and Outreach Officer at the RAS.

3.3 Future of Herstmonceux

MLO raised that Queens University in Canada are looking at withdrawing funding for the Observatory Science Centre at Herstmonceux. The Science Centre is potentially looking for a new site. Joe Silk is meeting the chair of trustees and the Society should involve him.

MLE, who attends the Heritage Committee commented that they were aware of the situation. One of the members had filed an FOI request.

Action: An RAS fact finding group to be established. A zoom meeting to be set up to include MLO, RM, PD, Joe Silk, Martin Ward.

4. TREASURER'S BUSINESS

4.1 Statement of Account and Treasurer's Report was received by Council.

AP mentioned the increasing demand for small grants, with in excess of £250K requested, whereby we only have an allocation for £125K. Education and Outreach distribution of grants reached £108K.

AP said that we should continue to look at the trends with the grants. AP reported that there had been an increase in applications for the Gerald Merton fund.

Action: Communications Officer to publicise the list of grants awarded

AP highlighted the uncertainty regarding publishing income and will be meeting with OUP next week.

AP reported that IAU finances were not in a great shape and they are looking towards fundraising.

Action: SU to produce a findings report regarding the IAU for December's Council meeting.

4.2 Pension Scheme Changes was received by Council.

AP explained the pension scheme is reviewed regularly and in the 2024 review, Broadstone recommended that the current pension fund, Legal & General Multi Asset Fund, was no longer suitable to provide the long-term growth necessary to provide an adequate pension to members as, for one reason, it didn't carry a sufficient percentage of growth funds (equities).

Members of the Finance Committee reviewed Broadstone's work and recommendations. The Committee recommended the AVIVA option which demonstrated consistent long-term financial performance with low fees and other satisfactory assessment criteria including financial strength, member support, administration and operations.

The Committee also recommends the adoption of a salary sacrifice arrangement for staff. This would so provide a saving in National Insurance.

The Society will save around £9,000 annually in National Insurance (which it is currently paying over to HMRC). The cost of setting up this scheme is around £10,000. It is planned that in year two, this £9,000 saving will be passed onto employees.

It was proposed that:

- We change the pension fund from Legal & General Multi Asset Fund to the AVIVA option
- We change the way in which pension funds are funded by adopting a salary sacrifice scheme.

This was agreed by Council

MLO declared a conflict of interest as he has a sister-in-law who sits on the board at AVIVA.

5. ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE

5.1 Report by Executive Director

PD updated Council on the current situation with the lease. PD explained that the lease has been signed in accordance with the bye-laws whereby two trustees were required to witness the seal. Mike Lockwood and James Hammond performed this duty.

The Government are currently exploring a loophole found in the lease. When this has been resolved, it is anticipated that this will be signed off, without the need to seal the documents again.

Astronomer Royal – PD updated Council that a shortlist of three was submitted to the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government and we are still waiting for a decision.

- 5.2 Acquisition of Headlease final report from Moore Kingston Smith (MKS) LLP auditors, acting on behalf of the Courtyard Societies was received by Council

Council noted that they had seen and read the Headlease final report from MKS, particular attention was given to the ~~recommendation-opinion~~ “Having regard to the above considerations, in our opinion it is reasonable for the Society to grant a charge over its premises at Burlington House in order to provide security for the payment of the deferred consideration set out in the terms of the proposed lease arrangements.It should be noted that the scope of our report is to advise whether it is reasonable to grant a charge over the premises that will be the subject of lease arrangements in order to secure the obligation to pay the deferred consideration for the lease premium. We do not therefore express any opinion as to whether the terms of the lease are reasonable or whether the amount of the agreed premium for the acquisition of the lease is reasonable”.

- 5.3 Strategy – Delivery Plan was received by Council.

SM raised the point regarding Education and Outreach that we (sic) are turning inward into the already-STEM-orientated and away from the wider public, the more-STEM-deprived groups and hard-to-reach audiences that can benefit hugely from even tangential involvement with the sciences we represent.

SM felt that this document did not indicate any willingness on the part of the Society to be involved with the kind of groups RAS200 engaged with and enthused.

MLE asked when RAS200 was signed off and suggested that this is included in the highlights feature in the document.

Action: PD/RM/AM to include priorities as identified in RAS200 in the Education and Outreach section and include RAS200 as a highlight in the document.

- 5.4 Nominations

Council were informed by MLE that the nominations process was about to start again. Council were asked to approve and agree the text for the nominations pack.

Council agreed and approved the nominations text and pack.

- 5.5 NAM media coverage was received by Council.

- 5.6 NAM 2025

PD updated Council on his recent visit to Durham and told Council that the LOC are organising this very effectively. PD mentioned that the Awards Dinner is

scheduled to be held on Tuesday in Newcastle, with the Council meeting taking place the same day.

PD informed Council that University of Birmingham hope to host the 2026 NAM and will be doing a presentation at the December Council meeting. PD informed Council that he RM/AM will be meeting with members of their LOC next week.

Action: Office to arrange University of Birmingham NAM presentation at December's Council meeting.

PD asked Council for any suggestions of universities to host future NAMs SE suggested University of Sussex.

5.7 Martyn's Law - Draft Preventative Plan was received by Council.

5.8 Governance review

PD reported that Lucy Devine, Wellspring Consulting is reviewing several areas which include Trustee Code of Conduct. PD explained that charity solicitors will review the bye-laws. Other considerations include Lengths of terms for the VP and officer roles.

Action: Lucy Devine to report back on developments at December Council.

5.9 Higher Education, teaching and learning

Andy Newsam, Chair of the Education and Outreach Committee, had raised the question about the role RAS could take in teaching and learning in a university context. PD asked for an open discussion.

JH commented that to be involved in the 'G' aspect would be a good start but reflected on the decline of students. Perhaps the best avenue was the BGA to be involved, specifically with the QAA on their benchmarking programme..

Generally undergraduate astronomy falls within physics degrees, however AS reported that the University of Hertfordshire currently have a degree in Astronomy.

PD summarised that there was no particular enthusiasm to start a new initiative in this area, except to ensure that RAS cooperates with the Institute of Physics' accreditation scheme, where it is relevant to astronomy.

Action: JH/AC/MLO/PD to arrange a meeting to discuss how 'G' can be acknowledged better.

6. POLICY AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

6.1 Science and Technology Select Committee was received by Council.

6.2 Social media policy

PD opened the discussion for Council to comment on the Social Media Policy. PD commented that some of the definitions could be better explained i.e. controversial and extreme. OK raised the point that the document is mainly focused on staff. However, she suggested that the RAS could have responsibility to protect a Fellow if as a result of the RAS social media activities they are subjected to harassment.

AS suggested that we should not focus on something specific if mentioning extremism or controversial topics. AS suggested that the policy itself needs a safeguarding section.

MG asked for clarity on whether this was any RAS account.

RM explained the relevance of the policy to RAS staff and stated that personal accounts have different rules.

MLO explained that we are also governed by the Charity Commission regulations and guidelines and that we should bear this in mind when writing this policy document.

Council was asked to give provisional approval on the document provided that some changes are made.

Action: RM to make amendments to the document and bring back to December Council for information.

6.3 Media coverage at NAM was received by Council.

6.4 National Planning Policy Framework was received by Council

6.5 External Communications working group

RM reported that the group was to meet later in October.

7. OTHER

7.1 The Membership Officer's Reports was received by Council. All proposed fellows were approved.

OK noted that one resignation was elected in 1921. OK noted that one proposed Fellow had the same first and last name.

Action: Membership officer to amend the election date of 1921 and check the proposed Fellow with the same first and last name.

7.2 Minutes of the Membership Committee 13 June 2024, were received by Council

7.3 An update on Journal Submissions for September were received by Council.

Council members raised questions on the lack of data. IH asked if the data from September 2023 was missing, and enquired about the number of accepted papers per month. PD explained that Publishing will present a full set of figures in February, when they have more data so they can provide an in depth analysis.

8. AOB

On-line database of RAS members and interests (e.g. willingness to give talks) - Stephen Eales

SE opened up a discussion about having a 'Find a Fellow' database for Fellows to use. AM stated that this is possible and would need to be scoped out further i.e. purposes, groups, interests, locations etc.

Action: AM to put together a timeline for developing this

Sandwiches – SE raised a concern about not being able to bring your own lunch to the RAS at events.

Action: PD/AM to explore whether this is an option available and to report back.

Out of Town Meetings

Action: JH/SU will raise this item at December Council.

Space academic Network (SPAN) town hall meeting,

MM raised that SPAN townhall had mooted the idea of a space science Learned Society and asked whether we want to involve ourselves or do we need to look at who we are not reaching.

Action MLO/PD/RM to engage with SPAN.

Council Rose at 15:00 11 October 2024