MINUTES

Royal Astronomical Society

COUNCIL
A meeting of the RAS Council was held on Tuesday 8th July 2025 in Room TLC124, Durham University, Durham, and via Teams

Present:
Professor Mike Lockwood – President (Chair)
Professor Jim Wild – President Elect (G)
Dr Arvind Parmar – Treasurer
Professor Matthew Griffin – Vice-President (A)
Professor Steve Miller – Vice-President (G)
Professor Caroline Smith – Vice-President (G; online)
Dr Sheona Urquhart – Astronomy Secretary (A; online)
Professor James Hammond – Secretary (G)
Mrs Karen Anne Devoil – Councillor (G; online)
Dr Imogen Gingell – Councillor (G)
Professor Derek Ward-Thompson – Councillor (A)
Dr Ashley Spindler – Councillor (A)
Dr Alan Cayless – Councillor (A; online)
Dr Cyrielle Opitom - Councillor (A)
Dr Andrew Young – Councillor (A)
Dr Iain Hannah – Councillor (G)
Dr Mike Peel - Councillor (A)
Professor Andrew Curtis - Councillor (G)

In attendance:
Mr Ian Russell (Executive Director, RAS)
Dr Robert Massey (Deputy Executive Director)
Mr Audie Muller (Head of Operations)

1 Introductions

The President, Professor Lockwood, welcomed members with a special mention to the new members that had been elected to the Council meeting. New members introduced themselves, Professor Paul Crowther was introduced on behalf of Professor Lockwood. Apologies had been received from Professor Paul Crowther, Dr Chrysa Avdellidou, Professor Mark Lester, and Professor Stephen Eales.

On behalf of Council Professor Lockwood welcomed back Mr Audie Muller.

2 Declarations of interest

Members were invited to declare any interests relevant to the agenda. MLO noted a prior declaration concerning the satellite constellation item, which will be duly recorded. No further declarations were made. It was agreed that, moving forward, declarations will be requested annually to reflect any changes in members' circumstances.

Action: COI to be declared at December Council meeting (All)

3 Minutes and Matters Arising

3.1 Minutes of the meeting held on 9 May 2025 and matters

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 May were approved.

3.2 Matters Arising

3.2.1 Developments in the USA

MLO informed Council of the growing concern among approximately 168 state societies across Europe and the UK regarding recent developments in the United States affecting the scientific community. A letter of support, drafted and refined by RM, was sent to the American Astronomical Society (AAS), expressing solidarity with affected scientists. The AAS President responded positively, requesting permission to share the letter with Congress and fellows, and expressed hope for reversing the most severe funding cuts. The exchange was seen as a constructive step in fostering international scientific collaboration and advocacy.

3.2.2 Formal complaint (REDACTED)

Council was informed of a formal complaint submitted concerning alleged online harassment involving a Fellow, linked to a social media post related to an external event.

The complaint has triggered the Society's formal procedure, and the individual concerned has been notified.

Council discussed whether the matter warranted further investigation and agreed that officers should review the case and determine appropriate action, which may include recommendations up to suspension or expulsion.

It was noted that while the Society does not typically intervene in external online disputes, its involvement was justified due to the Society being named in the post. Council also reflected on the confidentiality of the process and agreed that names should not be recorded in the minutes, although transparency within Council remains important.

4 Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 9 May

MLO noted that, although it is not standard practice to review AGM minutes outside of the AGM itself, this review was necessary to ensure the minutes are confirmed as an accurate record. This is required because the approved minutes will be included in the documentation submitted to Council in support of proposed Charter changes.

The minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 9 May were signed by MLO and <u>approved</u>.

5. Strategic items

5.1 Changes to requirements for SDM organisers to encourage a report in A&G

IR raised to Council the need for organisers of Special Discussion Meetings (SDMs) and other activities/events to provide a brief written summary following each event. This is useful for Dr Sue Bowler (Editor, A&G) and Dr Indra Bains (Editor A&G), so that they can publish directly into A&G.

IR and MLO noted that this request had come from various sources and suggested making it a formal expectation within the event planning process. While not a strict requirement, it would serve as a useful lever to encourage compliance and help maintain accurate records.

SU supported the idea, noting that while a mandatory report might deter some volunteers, framing it as a light-touch expectation would be more effective. SU also suggested including photos to help illustrate the impact of the events.

CS shared her experience with the Paneth Meteorite Trust, where a lack of reporting had raised concerns about compliance with Charity Commission requirements. CS recommended adopting a similar approach—requiring a short report as a condition for future funding eligibility.

MLO agreed this could be justified under charity law, particularly when Society funds are used to support invited speakers.

JW proposed a light-touch approach, such as a one-page summary with optional photos and suggested a pro forma letter from the President to encourage submissions.

Council agreed this would strike a balance between accountability and volunteer support and endorsed the proposal as a standard expectation going forward.

Council endorsed the proposal.

Action: IR/AM to update the requirements for organisers

5.2 Consideration of voting mechanisms for elections to Council

Council discussed a paper on voting systems prepared by AM/IR, which was widely praised for its clarity and depth.

IR noted that the Society's bylaws do not prescribe a specific voting method, giving Council flexibility in how elections are conducted. MLO highlighted that many voting systems support minority representation, which can be both beneficial and potentially problematic, depending on the nature of the minority group. MLO cautioned against systems that could be exploited by disruptive factions, referencing the "Restore Trust" example.

CS raised concerns about the complexity of implementing alternative systems and the burden on voters when ranking multiple candidates. JW suggested that while alternative systems may offer fairer representation, they could also complicate the process, especially when electing multiple councillors simultaneously.

Council agreed that no immediate changes would be made, but the topic should be revisited later in the year.

Further discussion focused on whether changes to voting mechanisms would require AGM approval. IR/MLO clarified that while technically not required, it would be preferable to present any changes to the AGM for transparency and endorsement. IR noted that the current bylaws imply a consistent voting method across roles, though this could be interpreted flexibly.

SM raised concerns about low voter turnout, noting that in a recent election fewer than 700 members voted out of a total membership of around 4,200. SM argued that the best way to counter unrepresentative outcomes is to increase participation. CS and others agreed, suggesting that many members, particularly postdocs, may not feel connected to Council's work.

SU and others proposed using departmental representatives and visual materials (e.g. candidate videos) to boost engagement.

IR acknowledged that while turnout is relatively strong compared to other organisations, there is room for improvement.

Action: Council agreed to take a measured approach: members will review the voting systems outlined in AM/IR's paper and submit preferences. A prototype ballot paper will be developed based on the majority view, ensuring it aligns with AGM procedures and the Society's governance structure. A final decision will be made in October, in time for any changes to be implemented for the next election cycle (All).

5.3 Reformation of RAS Satellite Constellation consultation groups

Council discussed the reactivation of the Satellite Constellation Working Group to address growing concerns within the UK and international astronomy communities. RM explained that the aim is to establish a core group with defined responsibilities, supported by a broader advisory group open to wider participation.

Initial members will include individuals previously involved in related discussions, with the understanding that others may join as needed. Andy Lawrence has agreed to chair the group, given his significant prior involvement. RM noted that while some individuals have opted not to participate further, their decisions are respected.

A question was raised about the proposed merging of the radio and optical satellite groups. RM clarified that this is a pragmatic decision, as both areas share overlapping policy concerns and would benefit from a unified interface with external stakeholders, such as space agencies. However, the group will retain the flexibility to address domain-specific issues as needed.

Council supported the approach and agreed that a single chair and a clear communication structure would be beneficial.

Action: An email list will be established to facilitate broader engagement (RM).

6. Finance

6.1 February 2025 Small Grants and Awards Round

AP reported that the February round of small grants had closed with 78 applications, down from 110 the previous year.

6.2 jAG/RAS Summer School

Council reviewed the successful joint RAS–German Astronomical Society summer school, which supported 12 postgraduate students. Feedback was positive.

Council agreed to continue supporting this initiative, maintaining the £500 per student limit without a cap on the number of awards.

6.3 Undergraduate Bursaries

Council also discussed the undergraduate summer bursary scheme, which has remained at £1,200 for over a decade. AP proposed increasing the amount to £1,450, with several members supporting a rise to £1,500 to reflect inflation and ensure accessibility.

Concerns were raised that the current amount may exclude students who cannot afford to forgo paid summer work, potentially undermining the scheme's inclusivity. It was noted that universities often offer higher rates, and aligning with these would help ensure fairness.

Council agreed to raise the bursary to £1,500 for the upcoming round and to review comparable schemes to inform future adjustments.

There was consensus that the funding should be used effectively while supporting equitable access to research opportunities.

Council also agreed to revisit the bursary level in future once more financial data is available.

6.4 Finance Committee Membership

AP reported that following a call for new Finance Committee members last year, seven applications were received. Four candidates were shortlisted, and Mr Philip Diamond contacted two others—Miss Al Dakak and Jeff Thompson—for further information. Miss Al Dakak did not respond, but Jeff Thompson expressed continued interest.

Council approved the recommendation to appoint Jeff Thompson to the Finance Committee.

Members welcomed the appointment, noting the value of engaging individuals who had previously expressed interest.

6.5 Fellowships

AP also raised the issue of RAS-funded fellowships, noting that the Society currently supports two to three per year, down from a previous level of two annually. AP proposed that the Finance Committee explore the feasibility of increasing this support, particularly in light of concerns raised by postgraduates and early-career researchers.

Council members expressed strong support for this, recognising the strategic importance of investing in early-career researchers. It was suggested that external or corporate support could also be explored to supplement funding.

Action: Council agreed that the Finance Committee should review this matter in detail, considering both financial viability and alignment with the Society's mission (AP).

6.6 Other Financial Matters:

AP noted for information that the Finance Committee had recommended continuing the current policy of not repaying the loan on Burlington House at this time. Council acknowledged the update.

7. Operational items

7.1 Approval of a new member of the Library Committee

Council approved the appointment of Dr Richard McKim (Archivist of the British Astronomical Association (BAA) and Director of the BAA Mars Section) as a new member of the Library Committee. No objections were raised to the nomination, and the vacancy will now be filled.

7.2 Executive Director's update

7.2.1 Fire Safety and Power Outage

IR informed Council that the Society's buildings consultant has advised urgent attention to fire safety works, following an inspection conducted approximately 18 months ago. IR reported that while some preparatory work has been completed, the next step requires project management support to determine the specific works needed. A quote for this work was received but considered high, and no competitive tenders had yet been sought.

Council approved proceeding with an initial phase of work, at £5,000, while tendering for the remaining project management work, currently estimated at £15,000.

IR reported to Council the recent power outage caused by a fire at a nearby tube station led to a temporary closure of Burlington House and highlighted safety concerns, including the risk of individuals being locked in. These issues are being addressed, and power was expected to be restored the same evening. Council noted that in urgent health and safety matters, immediate action should be taken without waiting for formal Council approval.

7.2.2 Courtyard Societies

Council discussed the level of coordination between the courtyard societies. IR and AM reported that communication is currently strong, with weekly CEO meetings and Operational meetings, and collaboration through Burlington House.

While each society manages its own internal space, there is shared responsibility for the external structure. IR noted that while current cooperation is effective, more formal governance structures may be needed in future to ensure resilience beyond individual relationships. Discussions are also ongoing around shared challenges such as safety, fundraising, and member engagement. Carter Jonas has been appointed to support property management and explore commercial opportunities across the courtyard.

7.2.3 Fundraising

IR mentioned that Sarah Don-Bramah has been appointed to conduct high-level scoping work on fundraising and strategic opportunities for the RAS. While her work is currently focused on the Society, she may engage with other courtyard societies in future. Council noted that while each society is pursuing its own internal plans, there is active sharing of ideas and experiences, particularly around public engagement and fundraising.

7.2.4 Future Utilisation

Council discussed the importance of defining long-term aspirations for the use of Burlington House. Members agreed that while fire safety remains the immediate priority, a broader vision is needed to guide future renovations. IR noted that Council will need to consider whether to adapt the building for flexibility without a fixed plan, or to define specific uses and design accordingly.

Action: IR to bring forward a set of options for Council to consider at a future meeting.

Initial principles were discussed, including the idea of dedicating the ground floor to public-facing activities such as exhibitions and events, while relocating routine operations to upper floors. This would have implications for staffing, accessibility, and opening hours—particularly the potential to open at weekends to attract visitors from the nearby Royal Academy. Council also discussed the potential for a gift shop or café, and the need to modernise the lecture theatre to support more flexible and accessible use. Members agreed that any redevelopment should preserve the building's heritage while improving its functionality and public engagement potential.

7.3 Government spending review

RM provided an update on the latest government spending review, noting that while the outcome was not as severe as initially feared, the overall settlement remains challenging. The science budget has received a modest uplift, slightly above flat cash, but concerns remain about the impact of inflation on subscriptions, building costs, and research funding.

RM emphasised that while the immediate outlook is more stable than expected, uncertainties persist, particularly beyond the next financial year.

Council also discussed broader shifts in government priorities, including reports that some research institutions are being encouraged to pivot towards defence-related work. While these developments are still unfolding, members noted the importance of monitoring how such changes may affect funding allocations and the research landscape.

Council agreed to remain vigilant and continue engaging with policymakers to advocate for the interests of the astronomy and geophysics communities.

7.4 Publishing report

7.4.1 Publishing Report and Licensing Update

Council received the publishing report for information. IR noted that a more detailed discussion is scheduled for the strategy meeting on 9–10 September. SM noted a notable spike in March usage statistics and this was confirmed by MLO and IR that this was attributed to a likely data mining licence sale, although full details have not been disclosed by OUP. While the licence provides a welcome financial boost, it does not affect the Society's core publishing income. Council acknowledged that such licences are increasingly common and may become more regulated in future.

A question was raised about the future of the publishing programme, particularly in light of recent developments with GGI and Blackwell. IR advised that these strategic issues would be addressed at the away day. IR emphasised the importance of progressing publishing reforms thoughtfully—moving the "ship forward" without destabilising it—and reiterated that while Council has oversight of editorial appointments, it should avoid interfering in day-to-day editorial decisions.

7.5 Update on the Away Days to discuss publishing

IR also updated Council on plans for the upcoming away day, with a venue in South Oxfordshire under consideration due to cost and availability constraints in central London. The venue will prioritise informal discussion space.

Action: Details to be sent to Council when the venue has been confirmed (IR/AM)

7.6 Membership

7.6.1 Membership report

It was noted that Hermann Opgenoorth, an Honorary Fellow had past. IR confirmed that MLE will be writing an obituary.

The Membership report from the Membership Officer was noted.

7.6.2 New Fellows for approval

The list of candidates proposed for Fellowship was approved.

8 Reports and Minutes from Committee and Working Groups (for information)

8.1 Library Committee – Minutes of the meeting held on 18 January 2025

The minutes of the Library Committee meeting held on 18 January 2025 was noted.

8.2 Astronomical Heritage Committee – Minutes of the meeting held on 16 September 2025

The minutes of the Astronomical Heritage Committee meeting held on 16 September 2025 was noted.

8.3 Minutes of the Finance Committee meeting held on 17 April 2025

The minutes of the Finance Committee meeting held on 17 April 2025 was noted.

9 Any other business

9.1 Trustee Responsibilities – Norman Lockyer Trust

IR informed Council that trustees of the Royal Astronomical Society are also trustees of the Norman Lockyer Trust, although this has not been clearly communicated in the past. IR noted that many trustees were unaware of this responsibility, and that the Trust currently has no active expenditure. Further investigation is underway to clarify its operational status and determine whether it should remain listed as a separate charity. Council agreed that simplifying and consolidating oversight of such entities should be considered.

9.2 Trustee Induction and Governance Improvements

Council welcomed feedback from members on recent improvements to trustee induction. JW praised the current process, including the building tour and the trustee responsibilities session led by Lucy Devine, noting it was significantly better than in previous years. Council discussed the possibility of creating a short online induction video for prospective candidates to view before standing for election. Council expressed appreciation for the improvements and agreed to consider further enhancements to trustee onboarding and communication.

9.3 Agenda and Papers

A request was also made to include the agenda at both the top of the paper pack and separately for easier navigation.

Action: Agenda to be circulated separately along with papers for future Council meetings.

9.4 Geophysics Education and Advocacy

RM and JH updated Council on recent efforts to address the decline in geophysics and related undergraduate courses across the UK. JH/RM and colleagues submitted a joint letter to the Science Minister, supported by university leaders, highlighting the closure of geophysics programmes and the broader implications for the scientific community. A response from the Scottish Government acknowledged the issue but offered limited engagement.

Council noted that this trend reflects wider pressures on universities and the undervaluing of science subjects, particularly those with higher delivery costs. A submission to the House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry into higher education is being prepared by RM, focusing on the loss of regional provision and the impact on research capacity.

SM proposed convening a small group of Council and BGA members during the upcoming away day to explore how the Society can more actively promote geophysics and planetary science.

KD highlighted two upcoming opportunities: a geoscience-focused conference at the Geological Society in November and an early career meeting at UCL/Birkbeck. KD proposed that the RAS be invited to speak at the former and suggested both events could serve as platforms to raise the profile of geosciences. MLO and IR welcomed the proposals and confirmed the Society's interest in supporting and potentially co-sponsoring the events. MLO emphasised the importance of framing RAS's involvement around geophysics' contribution to societal benefit and wealth creation. Council agreed that these initiatives align well with the Society's strategic goals and should be pursued.

Action: KD to keep Council up to date with developments. IR/MLO/RM to explore opportunities at these events.

Date of next meeting

Friday 10th October at the Royal Astronomical Society, Burlington House

There being no other business the meeting closed at 15:32.

This Action Status Report tracks progress on all assigned actions and will be appended to the minutes for ongoing reference.

Number	Action	Lead Person/s	Status	When by?
2 Declarations of interest	COI to be declared at December Council meeting (All)	IR/AM		Dec-25
3.3 Formal complaint	Redact any names related to this matter in the minutes	AM		Oct-25
5 Changes to requirements for SDM organisers to encourage a report in A&G	IR/AM to update the requirements for organisers	IR/AM		Oct-25
6 Consideration of voting mechanisms for elections to Council	Council agreed to take a measured approach: Council members will review the voting systems outlined in AM/IR's paper and submit preferences. A prototype ballot paper will be developed based on the majority view, ensuring it aligns with AGM procedures and the Society's governance structure. A final decision will be made in October, in time for any changes to be implemented for the next election cycle	All		Oct-25
7 Reformation of RAS Satellite Constellation consultation groups	An email list will be established to facilitate broader engagement	RM		Oct-25
8.2 jAG/RAS Summer School	AM to ensure that grants for the jAG/RAS Summer School are included in the February grant round.	AM		Oct-25
8.3 Undergraduate Bursaries	AM to ensure that undergraduate bursaries are increased to £1,500	AM		Oct-25
8.3 Undergraduate Bursaries	AP and IR to review the level of undergraduate bursaries to balance affordability with providing a level of support to support appropriate salary for a six to eight week placement.	AP/IR		Oct-25
8.4 Finance Committee Membership	AP to inform Mr Thompson that his appointment to the Finance Committee has been ratified.	AP		Oct-25
8.5 Fellowships	Council agreed that the Finance Committee should review this matter in detail, considering both financial viability and alignment with the Society's mission (AP).	AP		Dec-25

9 Approval of a new member of the Library Committee	IR to inform Sian Prosser the Dr McKim's appointment to the Library Committee has been ratified by Council.	IR		Oct-25
10.4 Future Utilisation	IR to bring forward a set of options for Council to consider at a future meeting.	IR		Oct-25
13 Update on the Away Days to discuss publishing	Details to be sent to Council when the venue has been confirmed	IR/AM		Oct-25
18.1 Trustee Responsibilities – Norman Lockyer Trust	IR to further investigate the status of the Norman Lockyer Trust, how its charitable activities are discharged and any impact on the Society and its Trustees	IR		Oct-25
18.2 Trustee Induction and Governance Improvements	AM to investigate the production of additional online resources to outline the role of Trustees to inform potential candidates	AM		Oct-25
18.3 Agenda and Papers	AM to ensure that the agenda is circulated separately and along with papers for future Council meetings.	AM		Oct-25
18.4 Geophysics Education and Advocacy	IR to ensure that a discussion on support for geophysics is scheduled for those interested over lunch during the away days.	IR		Oct-25
18.4 Geophysics Education and Advocacy	KD to keep Council up to date with developments. IR/MLO/RM to explore opportunities at these events.	KD/IR/MLO/RM		Oct-25

Note: This Action Status Report will be reviewed and updated at each meeting. Owners are responsible for providing progress updates ahead of the next scheduled meeting.