

Meeting Notes

Meeting:	Astronomy Forum,
Date:	2 – 4 pm, Thursday 30 April 2025
Present:	Astronomy Forum Members, in person and online via Zoom link, Prof. Michele Dougherty (Executive Chair, STFC), Prof. Grahame Blair (Executive Director, Programmes, STFC), Jenny Hiscock (Associate Director, Astronomy Programmes, STFC), Jake Gilmore (Head of Corporate Communications, STFC), Prof Paul Bate (CEO, UK Space Agency), Dr Caroline Harper (Head of Space Science, UK Space Agency), Adam Boal (RAS Education and Outreach Officer), Prof. Robert Massey (RAS Deputy Executive Director), Dr Sean McWhinnie (Oxford Research and Policy)
Topic:	Astronomy Forum

SUBJECT	NOTES	ACTIONS
Welcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome to the meeting Intros to meeting attendees Robert Massey invited attendees to vote for Forum chair 	
Election of chair (RAS Deputy Executive Director, RAS President)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two nominations for Mike Lockwood. No disagreements or other nominations, so Forum agreed he will serve as Chair for the remainder of his RAS presidency 	-
Recent political engagement (RAS Deputy Executive Director, all)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RM gave overview of recent RAS political engagement Includes impact of large satellite constellations, engagement with MPs, UK Space Agency, UN Committee on Peaceful Uses of Outer Space RAS provides secretariat for APPG for Dark Skies RAS giving evidence to Lords Engagement in Space inquiry, Commons Science and Technology Committee inquiry into Science Diplomacy Open invitation to attendees to share other activity and liaise with RAS 	Forum members to liaise with RAS re political engagement (All)

<p>Update from the Science and Technology Facilities Council (Prof. Michele Dougherty, Executive Chair)</p>	<p>Michelle Dougherty</p> <p>Powerpoint presentation – to be shared afterwards.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivered Presentation • Tag teamed remainder of session with Grahame Blair • Introduced key and newly appointed staff across orgs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEW UKRI CEO – Sir Ian Chapman – https://www.ukri.org/news/professor-sir-ian-chapman-to-join-ukri-as-new-chief-executive-officer/ From UK Atomic Energy Authority • NEW STFC COO – Keith Zimmerman – • NEW Exec director of national Labs Large scale Facilities – Prof Roger Eccleston <p>STFC council – appointments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prof David Charlton, Poynting Professor of Physics at University of Birmingham. He is an experienced Particle Physicist and was previously on Science Board (PPAN) • Prof Stan Bentvelsen, Professor at University of Amsterdam and former director of Nikhef. He is a scientific lead on Einstein Telescope (Gravitational Waves) • Prof Jayne Lawrence, Director of University of Manchester @ Harwell. She is a long term user of STFC facilities and a former chair of Science Board • Prof Andrew Pontzen, Professor of Cosmology Durham University. His research interests are the interfaces of astrophysics, high energy physics, cosmology and computation <p>Spending review – complicated process, Government aiming for 10 years, with review at halfway point.</p>	
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SR is Treasury run. STFC feed priorities to Treasury. UKRI then make allocation decisions.

Two phases:

1. Budget for year 2025-26. Out a month ago.
2. Phase two is for a 2-3 year period. We are expecting to hear in a month or so.

UKRI know funding. The RCs don't know **yet**.

Phase 1 was announced end of April
With £8.8 billion UKRI budget, effectively flat cash.

STFC – not the only RC looking at spending, but given pressures was being careful re awarding grants to make sure didn't have to cancel after the fact.

Overall, pressures on budget remain; inflation has been significant and not matched by funding increases, staffing costs have increased.

Other impacts from Covid, technical challenges, international commitments and MOUs that need to continue for long term agreements

Result has been a lower success rate for astro grants, and not renewing some, some are paused. Also need to be reducing fixed costs, facilities costs and staff numbers.

Phase 2 of Spending Review – June will see initial announcement. UKRI submitted flat real bid. Keen to still ensure new discoveries and curiosity driven research are supported, enthusiasm for this from science minister.

Discussion (responses from STFC and UKSA staff in italics):

- Can we aim to target a % for the facilities part of the budget?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big issues for HE as a whole - prospect of closures of physics depts and resulting loss of staff capacity to deliver research • Small awards – success was previously high, financial constraints mean this is now low • US data (thinking of climate change) need to be rescued and retained before destruction – are there emergency plans in place? <p>- <i>Two astronomy projects have been paused</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Not the case all the pain is astronomy, is across the sector and e.g. nuclear physics has nine projects affected</i> - <i>Particle physicists have been working well together and coordinated, has helped them</i> - <i>Pause in funding followed advice from science board that this was the least worst way forward</i> - <i>Community fed into discussion through advisory panels</i> - <i>STFC working to reduce effort needed for grant – too much effort vs what can be funded</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2024 154 small and 11 large awards applied for in astronomy and space science; c. 1 in 3 success rate • In 2025 significantly more, 241 small award applications, so is STFC planning to keep success rate the same? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Very unlikely to happen; assumed funding level was rising over last two years, but now flat at best, but still have previous two years of grants running, so applications coming now are squeezed harder. Two effects: cut / restricted funding overall and profiling. Was anticipated this would be a large round, but evidence that people are being more selective in applications, so seeing fluctuation in numbers as a result</i> 	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is burden of review of 241 grants a huge increase? - <i>Simpler review forms, so burden is manageable</i> • But more to read, a pre-sift would cost money • Demand management problematic too • Is there consideration of how delayed starts will affect PDRAs already in post, but where funding will finish in March? • Did STFC put pressure on UKRI to reflect the expected increase in applications in 2025? - <i>GB: STFC did of course put in funding bid, but outcome determines our approach</i> • Is there a financial problem with the April to October 2026 delay – could we have a no cost extension before grant starts and end grant early, to keep people in post? - <i>GB: Can't do this due to need to make savings</i> • Resulting redundancy costs will be transferred to universities, could be a huge problem for institutions, not just for individuals - <i>GB: Science board did consider impact of university redundancies, adopted the delay approach as the least worst option, previously looking at a worse situation – worked hard to get where we are.</i> • Is it (actually) *possible* to issue letters to enable employment of postdocs ahead of awards, with the early start underwritten by universities? 	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>JH: Will keep to normal awards process this year, make awards in November, but they won't start until following year</i> • But if universities were willing to cover upfront costs and recover them from the grant, would this be possible? - <i>MD: UK Space Agency did something like this for a short period of time. Even though Agency was making decisions it couldn't confirm, it would guarantee funding for six months to avoid immediate pressure of redundancies. Universities UKSA spoke to needed a firm commitment of funding for six months to prevent redundancies, that was enough</i> • So, by making awards this year for start in October 2026, would university be permitted to employ postdocs ahead of time, ahead of funds arriving in their accounts. Is this possible? - <i>Grant regulation issue. MD – will take action to look at possibility.</i> • Welcome decision to prioritise small awards over large ones. Is there a decision on reinstating the latter? - <i>JH: Was a consultation on these schemes, will look to see if these are still appropriate, considering volume and concentration of PDRAs, was originally predicated on increase in grant funding that did not transpire</i> • How are small awards working? Evaluation of programme before next ones. • Large awards a collection of small awards, fairness aspect over preparation 	<p>MD to investigate feasibility of universities employing postdocs early before grant funds arrive</p>
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- *JH: My recollection is that they are not collections of small awards. Should certainly look at that though*
- ML: Reputational damage of repealing grants would be dreadful, so this is an important principle, letter of promise would have helped us, two postdocs were in this position, lost one who is now overseas, so - if we had a letter of promise, that hope could have kept our capacity, and would benefit university planning.

Remaining STFC slides covered updates on facilities, highlighted 8% increase in doctoral stipends, applications for Ernest Rutherford Fellowships, UKRI Future Leadership Fellowships

- RM: What conversations is STFC having with its counterparts in Chile on the light pollution threat from the proposed industrial plant next to the ESO Paranal site?
- *JH: DSIT International Facilities Team is actively lobbying in Chile, unsure of current Chilean government position*
- *Substantial regional and environmental report produced in Chile, company has to respond to this. Risk in this process is that company keeps on going, will be able to answer questions in due course and proceed. ESO report highlights more widespread harm than might think in first instance*
- RM: What work is being done to mitigate impact of Starlink Gen 2 defence satellites on facilities like LOFAR (and SKAO in future)?
- ML: impressed by how far SpaceX is prepared to, to try to fix this by switching off transmissions over radio observatories

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RM: But this is unintended radio emission... • ML: Worth contacting them when you're aware of problems • Quality factor that goes into allocation formulas could penalise small institutions, increases chance of getting zero PDRAs with limited number of applications. Can something be done to ensure at least one studentship? - <i>GB: ETCC looking into all of this, will always have groups that aren't covered, doing the best we can through advisory panels</i> • On studentships, lack of level playing field for small awards, depending on phasing of consolidated grants, could mean institutions are penalised twice, please bear this in mind 	
<p>Update from the UK Space Agency (Dr Paul Bate, CEO)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paul Bate – space agency <p>Gave an overview of the Government view on space, and the spending review consequences (thanks to CH for putting the work together on this). Space previously relatively siloed, now much more prominent across Government e.g. in home office, defence, FCDO.</p> <p>Have ministers in place covering space: Chris Bryant MP as sponsoring minister, Lord Vallance who wants to make the big decisions on space.</p> <p>Minister highlighted industrial strategy, with whole subsection on space, alongside spending review and strategic defence review. Ministers are well aware of multiple sources of value in space funding, discovery science as well as benefits for citizens, economic growth in short and medium term, national security – last two are priorities.</p> <p>Astronomy is not outside of these, not mutually exclusive, important to have scientific base and</p>	-

	<p>e.g. develop instrumentation, interdependencies matter.</p> <p>10% uplift in funding position for UK Space Agency, amounting to £681 million, very good outcome. Challenge is then what that means over next four years – e.g. giving out multiyear grants, but don't know yet about yearly allocations.</p> <p>Have gone up to the limit in forward commitments e.g. in six month funding for grants to support academic groups (to prevent redundancies). Can stand behind ESA and bilateral scientific programmes for coming year.</p> <p>UK Space Agency has new chief scientist – Prof. Adam Amara, brings expertise in house, working alongside CH.</p> <p>Always a complex and sometimes difficult situation, so One ask of everyone in the room is to please not go off and talk to other major agencies – risk is that they could lose confidence in (UK support) for a mission if briefing is inappropriate. Please talk to UKSA first.</p> <p>Previously received increase, but didn't have business case approval, now have that for five to ten years, so can spend funding. E.g. £250m for bilateral programme is approved by DSIT. Monitoring and evaluation framework in place too, based on inputs including ResearchFish. Numbers need to be bullet proof, open to scrutiny.</p> <p>November sees ESA Ministerial in Bremen, changed security context and new US administration add new complexity.</p> <p>ESA asking for a 4.5% above inflation uplift for three years for mandatory programme. Question of affordability.</p> <p>Working with ESA science directorate on 'mini fast' missions, to avoid 'feast or famine' and ensure a good bedrock of well reviewed science.</p>	
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	<p>Exploratory call for Mini F is out – closes at end of May. Some ESA member states are less convinced, so the more high quality proposals that come through the better.</p> <p>Ministerial a big moment every three years – absolutely caught up in politics of Europe and geopolitics more generally. These factors should not be only determinants of portfolio of investment.</p> <p>On US collaboration – in very close conversation with NASA. Talking with the teams there, e.g. Nikki Fox. Trying to understand what their position is, e.g. still waiting for confirmation of new administrator.</p> <p>UK intent is clear, message from ESA too is that we are good partners. Stand behind our missions and projects. Specific interest in HWO – recognising value and going through call for a UK-led instrument.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ML: will there be discussion at EAS Ministerial on picking up dropped NASA projects? <p>PB: Absolutely sure of this. Would be amazed if this wasn't in June ESA council as well as Ministerial. Might be picking up work, repurposing spacecraft etc., depends what is fundable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RM: glad ESA is looking at the consequences of US budget proposals. If even half of these go through, the description of it as an extinction level event for science is not exaggerated. • US – to recognise us as a reliable partner. Is the US one? <p>- They have been a reliable partner for decades, we say we are as that's the part we control</p>	
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	<p>Two good things: quick data release from Euclid – already delivering insights, not long since its launch, data coming from it, including from UK instrument.</p> <p>Gaia another impressive project, sits above Hubble publication numbers.</p> <p>Discussion (responses from UKSA and STFC staff in italics):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ML: Nikki Fox was my PhD student, agreed that she has our (Astronomy Forum) support - <i>CH: Chief scientist – Adam Amara –will be focusing on end to end prioritisation, discussing with STFC, need to talk more about bilateral missions. If we invest in a mission or instrument, look at outset on how exploitation of the funding and projects works. Want to support community in this area.</i> • ML: We want to help with impact of astronomy in defence and industrial strategy - <i>PB: Allocations beyond headline settlements for e.g. astronomy, please do link to impacts to help with this.</i> 	
<p>RAS Survey of Demographics and Research Interests (Sean McWhinnie, Oxford Research and Policy)</p>	<p>SM presented results of RAS Survey of Demographics and Research Interests – see slides</p> <p>Carried out in 2023, among departments and research groups on 19 returned completed questionnaires, so desk exercise gathered information on 62 departments from websites</p> <p>Advice on improving future returns welcome, GDPR should not prevent participation</p>	

	<p>956 astronomers and geophysicists completed individual questionnaires, ranging from PhD students to technicians to professors</p> <p>Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RM: planning to share results at National Astronomy Meeting • Shocking gender difference, suggests more women with children leaving the sector, could be lack of affordable childcare etc. • Lack of ethnic diversity not a new issue, other disciplines not as bad, e.g. medicine, business and computing. May also need to ensure parents are positive about children pursuing careers in subjects like physics and astronomy • Survey had no responses from Black British astronomers, confirming very low representation in our sector. Can speculate that geography (half of Black population of UK lives in London rather than elsewhere), being deterred from applying to “top” universities, feeling like an outsider, are factors [but needs proper investigation] • <i>JH: STFC participated in 10,000 Black internships scheme, had some really excellent students, could other areas participate in this? Huge energy and enthusiasm – incredibly capable group</i> 	
AOB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jamie Parkin – slide typo re gravitational waves – consolidate grant round runs for three years not two • Poshak Ghandi – any clarity on Open Access agreement with OUP, some doubt in our department • ML: email me re this as visiting OUP with Ian Russell, new RAS Executive Director in a week’s time • RM: please (Forum) let me know about your interests, successes and wider impacts in support of lobbying. RAS has more freedom than civil servants to voice concerns and points. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ML: this forum is a good place to build ourselves as a cohesive group, discuss and share and put forward our positions and collaborate on finding sensible suggestions for outcomes.	
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