

RAS Astronomy Forum

A meeting of the RAS Astronomy Forum was held at 2pm on 22 April 2026 (hybrid, Council Room at Burlington House and MS Teams).

Present

Jim Wild (Chair), Marieta Valdivia Lefort, Robert Massey, Ian Russell, Keith Grainge, Mike Lockwood, Michelle Dougherty, Grahame Blair, Lyndsay Fletcher, Jenny Hiscock, Maya Riddle, Pedro Ferreira, Hiranya Peiris, Megan Argo, Laura Wolz, Vik Dhillon, Cathie Clarke, Angus Bell, Martin Hardcastle, Ken Rice, Mat Page, Malcolm Bremer, Michail Mathioudakis, Ashley King, Catherine Heymans, Daniel Mortlock, Nicholas Walton, Katherine Joy, Oscar Gonzalez, Gavin Ramsay, Bob Mann, Graham Woan, Kristen Coppin, Jorick Vink, Jonathan Loveday, Alberto Vecchio, Tony McBride, Serhii Zharkov, Sheila Rowan, James Dunlop, Christopher Copperwheat, Chris Clarkson, Dominic Bowman, Noelia Noel, Tom Grinyer, Hendrik Van Eerten, Danny Steeghs, Leigh Fletcher, Chris Harrison, Peter Wheatley, Nick Teanby, Paul Clark, Giles Hammond, Keith Horne, Michael Smith, Mark Wyatt, Nick Wright, Sara Russell, Robert Ferdman, Andrzej Fludra, Gareth Collins, Anna McLeod, Ruben Sanchez-Janssen, Jake Gilmore, Isobel Hook, Andrew Pontzen, Grahame Blair, Manish Patel, Ulrich Kolb, Aprajita Verma, Adam Amara, Denis Erkal, Shufei Rowe, Nina Hatch, and other in-person attendees.

Background

The Astronomy Forum met in response to significant concern within the community regarding the financial position of STFC and the potential consequences for astronomy grants, postdoctoral researcher support, and project funding. The meeting provided an opportunity for discussion with STFC representatives and for the Forum to consider the implications of the ongoing prioritisation exercise. The meeting was conducted under Chatham House Rules. Accordingly, these minutes record the substance of the discussion without attributing comments to named individuals or identifying contributors.

1 Q&A with STFC

1.1 *Postdoctoral researcher / PDRA numbers*

- 1.1.1 **The initial question concerned the commitment to maintain postdoctoral researcher numbers across Particle Physics, Astronomy and Nuclear (PPAN) at the 2025/26 level and whether this meant grant-line posts, project posts, or both.** STFC clarified that the current focus was the grants line, specifically the small awards/Astronomy Grants Panel (AGP) grants. Project postdoctoral researchers were still subject to the prioritisation exercise, because STFC did not yet know which projects might be reduced or what the postdoctoral element within those projects would be.
- 1.1.2 Several participants said that the 2025/26 level was already a reduced baseline. The meeting noted that any impact assessment should consider AGP and project impacts together, including future effects on postdoctoral researcher numbers.
- 1.1.3 In the closed session, interpretations of the commitment differed. One view was that the position was an improvement because the postdoctoral commitment would not be funded by additional project cuts. Another view was that it locked in a low baseline for astronomy.

1.2 *Project cuts and PPAN prioritisation*

- 1.2.1 STFC had asked PPAN Science Board to examine scenarios involving 10%, 20% and 30% cuts across the PPAN remit, and to describe the impacts of those scenarios.
- 1.2.2 A participant raised concern about a downward spiral in which leaving world-leading projects would reduce the evidence base for future early-career researcher and PDRA funding.
- 1.2.3 A participant mentioned that the Science Board process included the chairs of the five advisory panels, giving a total of 22 people involved at that stage. They said Science Board had the 48 pro formas submitted by projects and had already contacted projects for clarification where needed.
- 1.2.4 A participant raised concern that the Projects Peer Review Panel (PPRP) and grants panel chairs were not involved, despite PPRP having reviewed many projects originally. Another participant acknowledged that this could be argued but said a larger group would be difficult to run. STFC said the current exercise was a strategic scenario exercise; detailed implementation and any necessary peer review would follow later.
- 1.2.5 Another participant said the prioritisation principles included the overall health of the PPAN programme on a 10-year timescale, even though the immediate challenge was short-term.
- 1.2.6 Participants stressed that AGP grant-line reductions had already been significant and should be considered in the round with project impacts.
- 1.2.7 On STFC spending plans for 2027/28, modelling was already under way but could not be completed until STFC knew what would stop within PPAN and within STFC more broadly.
- 1.2.8 The meeting noted that many project grants shown on Gateway to Research end in September 2026, meaning some project decisions were less than six months away from the meeting date.

1.3 Consultation, international review and PPAN within UKRI

A question asked whether the wider PPAN community would be part of consultation after the Science Board prioritisation exercise, and whether the international review would involve project partners or broader scientific experts.

- 1.3.1 STFC mentioned that the international review was expected to involve about five or six senior international scientists across astronomy, gravitational waves, particle physics and nuclear physics. Their role would be to look across the option space, identify whether anything had been missed, and advise where the UK might be more world-class than assumed.
- 1.3.2 According to one participant, after Science Board PPAN handed over scenarios, STFC planned to speak to individual project PIs during the summer. STFC replied that there would be several steps through UKRI, DSIT, government and the international panel; there would be an extended period of consultation with international partners and local PIs where necessary.
- 1.3.3 STFC mentioned a previous UKRI Executive Committee paper had proposed splitting STFC into two research councils: one focused on PPAN science, departments and associated labs, and one focused on multidisciplinary facilities. UKRI Executive Committee (ExCo) did not want an additional research council formed.
- 1.3.4 In the closed session, an early-career researcher clarified that, from their coordinated Early Career Researcher (ECR) discussions, they had not requested an assessment of a PPAN move to EPSRC. They said ECRs had been asked whether they wanted such a move and had responded that they did not know and that STFC should assess the question.
- 1.3.5 STFC noted that astronomy grant success rates are difficult to compare across councils because of demand management differences and scheme structures.

1.4 Sustainability, subscriptions, and the funding structure

- 1.4.1 A participant asked how STFC could achieve long-term sustainability for PPAN if grant lines could be compressed by fixed costs, facilities and currency fluctuations.
- 1.4.2 STFC is in conversations with DSIT and UKRI about the issue. The meeting heard that bucket 1 covered grants, projects, some STFC staff working on projects, and international subscriptions, and that if international costs continued to rise without an increase in funding, the PPAN community could not remain sustainable. Multidisciplinary international facilities had moved into bucket 4 and that what remained in bucket 1 were the international subscriptions enabling PPAN science.
- 1.4.3 On Drayson partitions, STFC mentioned that the way funding was allocated had changed and that the previous partitions never provided extra money for increased international subscriptions. After the formation of UKRI, the international subscriptions budget came together within the UKRI budget rather than being held separately in the ministry.

1.5 STFC Executive Board and PPAN expertise

- 1.5.1 STFC mentioned that financial issues have been discussed with the community the previous year but had not known the scale because STFC's

funding allocation was not known until December. The community was alerted to the scale in January.

- 1.5.2 STFC had prepared for flat cash and academic inflation of more than 5% and had already made cuts of “flat cash minus 5%” / about 15% to cover inflation and potential construction overruns. The actual outcome was worse than STFC had anticipated.
- 1.5.3 STFC has already alerted UKRI ExCo in the last six months of the previous year that a 30% cut would have a huge impact across communities, but final spending review outcomes were not certain until announced.

2 Closed Astronomy Forum session and Science Board PPAN update

After the Q&A, the meeting moved into a closed Astronomy Forum session.

2.1 Previous and current cuts

- 2.1.1 It was mentioned that LHCb and EIC had been identified for Infrastructure Fund money several years earlier but were informed just before Christmas that they had been deprioritised. Science Board PPAN and Council had not been consulted on those cuts, despite earlier review work by Science Board and advisory panels.
- 2.1.2 There had already been substantial damage to the programme, including delays and reductions in astronomy grant lines, a 12-month delay to the current astronomy large awards round and no astronomy large awards call in the current round, a particle physics theory PDRA reduction from 58 to 19.5, paused or withdrawn projects, 20-30% cuts to ATLAS and CMS upgrade programmes, LHCb and EIC Infrastructure Fund cuts, and the non-submission of ELT second-generation instrumentation to Infrastructure Fund wave 4 despite a Science Board recommendation.
- 2.1.3 On a possible PPAN move to EPSRC, Science Board PPAN had strongly recommended against it. Reasons for this included the different nature and timescale of PPAN science compared with typical EPSRC-supported work, and first-hand experience from nuclear physics of difficulties when under EPSRC.

2.2 Current prioritisation process

- 2.2.1 Science Board PPAN had been clear in reports to STFC Council that 30% cuts to PPAN science would be catastrophic, worse than the 2008 funding crisis.
- 2.2.2 The current prioritisation exercise was now focused on projects. Grant lines are no longer being balanced against projects in the exercise, and talent funding, PhD students, Ernest Rutherford Fellowships and international subscriptions are not part of the prioritisation process.
- 2.2.3 Science Board PPAN was asked to produce scenarios for flat cash, 10%, 20% and 30% cuts. That flat cash is also a cut and would involve significant pain. The scenarios must be produced for the Executive Board by 11 June 2026.
- 2.2.4 The review covers 48 projects, including PPD (Particle Physics Department) and UK ATC. These national lab elements had moved from bucket 4 into bucket 1. Projects received pro formas in late January with 12 questions covering experimental objectives, timelines, stakeholders, science drivers, skills, and the impact or possibility of 20%, 40% and 60% cuts, including the

point at which a project would become non-viable. All responses had been received.

- 2.2.5 The prioritisation principles included scientific excellence, UK leadership, value for money, and optimising PPAN programme health over a 10-year timescale, including effects on early-career researchers.
- 2.2.6 Science Board PPAN had received advisory panel input on 3 and 4 March, alongside roadmap documents and 2024 advisory panel updates. The grant lines were identified as a top priority across PPAN, although they were no longer being balanced against projects in the current process.
- 2.2.7 The pro formas had been assessed through 13 meetings. Science Board PPAN had produced a project triage and begun creating scenarios, joined by advisory panel chairs and council observers to help ensure a fair and equitable process. Science Board PPAN was seeking further clarifications from projects as needed.
- 2.2.8 Science Board PPAN owns the final scenarios and recommendations. Science Board Facilities and Labs is conducting its own parallel prioritisation process on the same 11 June timescale.

3 Discussion following the Science Board PPAN update

After STFC participants left, the remaining attendees discussed strategy, messaging, and next steps.

3.1 *Sustainability of proposed project cuts*

- 3.1.1 A participant raised concern that projects might propose cuts to project management that would make them unsustainable and lead to later requests for additional money.
- 3.1.2 Science Board PPAN had identified some proposed cuts as inappropriate because they would create high risk to the programme. In those cases, Science Board had gone back to the projects to ask for an alternative 20% cut scenario or for the project to state that anything below flat cash would make it non-viable.

3.2 *What Science Board PPAN will hand over*

- 3.2.1 A participant asked what Science Board PPAN would pass upwards. This would provide recommendations for the requested scenarios and a narrative explaining the impacts, such as the loss of a field in the UK, failure to exploit an international subscription, loss of expertise, or loss of leadership. Science Board would also produce a public report explaining how it had conducted the process.

3.3 *Wider impact on physics departments and universities*

- 3.3.1 A participant asked who would assess the wider impacts on UK physics, university physics departments, students and the economy. Science Board PPAN's remit was the PPAN scientific programme; the Institute of Physics could be the natural home for broader departmental concerns.
- 3.3.2 The IOP is working closely with the RAS and others. A September 2025 survey of Heads of Physics found that 26% of physics, astrophysics and astronomy departments were looking at closure or cuts before the scale of the current cuts was known, and the IOP was about to repeat the survey. The IOP is in conversation with DfE about an early warning system for physics

departments and with EPSRC/Research England about making a case for work on the sustainability of physics departments.

- 3.3.3 A participant raised concern that embedded physics or astronomy groups, for example those within larger schools led outside physics, might not receive the IOP survey. To this, the RAS could disseminate surveys to Forum members and the IOP can share and disseminate through equivalent groups.

4 Close

Continued uncertainty around PDRA protection and the possibility that the prioritisation scenarios would demonstrate catastrophic impacts. Ongoing pressure on policymakers appeared to be having some effect and encouraged continued advocacy while the Science Board process continued.