Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Phil Willis MP, Chairman

Professor Keith Mason Chief Executive Science and Technology Facilities Council Polaris House North Star Avenue Swindon SN2 1SZ

25th June 2008

SCIENCE BUDGET ALLOCATIONS

The Committee has considered the Government's Response to its Report on the Science Budget Allocations and has written to the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills in relation to it. Our primary concern with the Government's response is that it spoke on behalf of STFC on a number of occasions, where we would have preferred a response directly from STFC. We highlight these occasions below, as we consider STFC's responses point-by-point.

Para 53

We welcome STFC's decision to commission an independent organisational review. We would like a copy of the review upon completion.

Conclusion 10

Please could you provide a response to Conclusion 10.

Conclusion 11

STFC is right to characterise PPARC's strategy for solar-terrestrial physics (STP) as "continued investment in EISCAT but withdrawal from all other facilities", but wrong to characterise its Delivery Plan 2008/09–2011/12 similarly. The Delivery Plan stated: "We will cease all support for ground-based solar-

terrestrial physics" (p 6). STFC argues that it "should not suspend the implementation of the policy previously agreed by PPARC in March 2006" (para 61 of the response). Since PPARC's intention was "to maintain a capacity in ground-based STP" (see para 56 of the report), STFC should not characterise this intention as being in disagreement with our report. We urged STFC to suspend its decision to withdraw from *all* ground-based STP, not PPARC's decision to withdraw from *some* ground-based STP.

Conclusions 12, 13, 14 and 15

The Government has spoken on behalf of STFC in paragraphs 66 and 67 of the response. Please could you provide a response to these conclusions.

Conclusion 16

Please could you provide a response to conclusion 16.

Conclusion 17

Please could you provide a response to conclusion 17.

Conclusion 18

We are pleased that STFC has accepted our criticisms and recommendations on the matter of internal and external communications. We would like to receive a copy of the action plan for implementation of STFC's strategy to improve its communications structure and capability.

We are also pleased to hear that STFC has made a number of changes to improve internal communications. Please could you outline what these are and how you plan to review the effect of these changes.

Conclusion 21

In reference to the reviews of in-house research, which we labelled as "secretive" (para 95 of the report), STFC has responded by saying that "STFC does not agree that these reviews were 'secretive' [...] STFC always intended to publish these reports in a suitably anonymised form" (para 89 of the response). This does not tally with what Professor Keith Mason told us on 27 February 2008. In explaining to us why he set up the reviews of in-house research, he repeated what he told the reviewers: "I told them, 'You can be as honest with me as you like because this report is coming to me to advise me, it is not going to be shared with my managers or staff, so you can tell me what you really think" (Q 326 of the oral evidence). A little later he went on to say that "the problem is that this exercise [i.e., the reviews of in-house research ...] is taking on a significance that it never was intended to have and does not deserve. In the light of that we will be making the reviews public and people will be able to see what they say" (Q 334 of the oral evidence).

To summarise, Professor Keith Mason told us that the reviews were commissioned under the assumption that they were for his eyes only, and that only after concern about the reviews had been expressed did STFC decide to make the reviews public. STFC's response said that it always been the intention to publish the reviews. Please could you explain the discrepancy between these two versions of events and say which one is correct.

We would appreciate a response to each of the points we have raised above by Friday 11th July.

Phil Willis

Chairman



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11 July 2008

Dear Phil

SCIENCE BUDGET ALLOCATIONS

Thank you for your letter of 25 June 2008. Before I address in detail the issues on which you have asked for further information, I thought it would be helpful to update the Committee on recent developments.

We have now completed the programmatic review, following a period of extensive consultation with the community. We have and will learn further lessons from this process of consultation and will introduce further improvements in our advisory structure.

Our investment plans are ambitious and forward-looking as well as affordable and will in our view sustain the UK's competitive edge. To make room for investment in important new opportunities, there will inevitably be some groups who will not be funded but we will work with them to manage the rundown of existing programmes sensitively. We recognise that concerns remain about grant funding and we are working with the community to address these.

One outcome of the programmatic review is that we have now reached agreement with the University of Manchester on continuing investment in e-Merlin at Jodrell Bank and have resolved positively the future of the ALICE project at Daresbury.

Finally the Committee will be aware that we have agreed with DIUS to carry out an Organisational Review. This process of both self-assessment and

external scrutiny will enable us to identify further steps we can take to improve our organisation moving forward.

Paragraph 53

Both the report of the organisational review and an STFC action plan in response to it will be published. It is not yet possible to say when it will be complete as the first stage of the process is just underway. Copies will be made available to the Committee.

Conclusion 10

The STFC is not planning to cease investing in research in fields in which the UK excels. The choice is about how best to invest in these areas within our allocation to maintain the UK's competitive edge. The programme which the STFC has decided to support will enable us to exploit new world-class facilities, to participate in R & D for future new international facilities and to continue to exploit those existing facilities and projects which will continue to be highly productive and competitive. In order to invest in new opportunities we will reduce or cease funding in some specific programmes which we now judge are relatively less likely to deliver the highest scientific impact.

Conclusion 11

Our intent is to pursue the plans set in place by PPARC in March 2006 i.e. to invest in the EISCAT facility under the terms of our international agreement up to 2011 and to withdraw our support for other STP facilities. I apologise to the Committee for the lack of clarity about the STFC's position

We have and will continue to encourage the STP research community to pursue other sources of funding, perhaps through the Living with Environmental Change cross-Council initiative, and will seek to play an enabling role in any such discussion.

Conclusions 12, 13, 14, 15

I welcome this opportunity to re-state STFC's position on the future of Daresbury.

The STFC is fully committed to the development of the Daresbury Science and Innovation Campus as a world-leading centre of excellence and leadership in scientific research, in technological innovation which underpins both advances in science as well as economic impact, and in knowledge exchange, building on expertise at Daresbury.

We are in the process of turning this ambition into "a concrete programme of future activity". Scientists and technologists at Daresbury are heavily involved in the new Light Source project. We have submitted plans to DIUS for capital investments in the Hartree Centre, a new computational science centre, and in a Detector Systems centre which will bring together scientific and industrial

expertise to develop sensors for both research and commercial use. We will invest in accelerator science and technology R&D for the next generation of accelerator facilities including operating ALICE (ERLP) for the period of the spending review and to support EMMA, a medical accelerator prototype. We are pursuing co-funding opportunities with stakeholders including NWDA to sustain increased operations of ALICE.

The STFC does not preclude a new major science facility on the Daresbury campus but it cannot commit to it as part of its strategy. Our role is to develop the science cases for future large scale facilities. Decisions on whether specific capital projects will be supported from the large Capital Facilities Fund are based on advice to Government from RCUK, which prioritises bids from across the Research Councils. The decision on where future facilities will be sited will be based on broader considerations, including the Government's and other stakeholders' strategies for the development of the Daresbury campus. Given that a decision on any future large facility is likely to be some years away, our focus is on building the scientific and technological capability on the Daresbury campus as outlined above.

In relation to Conclusion 15, the STFC is a national Research Council and must base its investment decisions on what it considers best to sustain the competiveness of the UK research base as a whole. In doing so we will work actively with a wide range of stakeholders including Universities and the RDAs to ensure the UK has the necessary critical mass of expertise in support of science and innovation and public funding is deployed optimally.

Conclusion 16

The STFC's current view remains that its in-house programme is best managed coherently across its laboratories. This enables our laboratories to work both for their benefit and for the benefit of the UK research base as a whole and avoids unhealthy competition. Many of the Council's programmes are delivered by deploying resources from more than one laboratory and the current management structure ensures that these resources are used optimally. Within this structure a senior Director located at the Daresbury and Rutherford Laboratories has designated responsibilities as Head of Site to ensure there is effective engagement with local external stakeholders, the staff and Trade Unions.

Conclusion 17

The STFC acknowledges the anxiety in the research community over the level of our grants investment in the spending review period. The STFC has not intentionally sought to play down the effects. It has been clear throughout that there will be a 25% cut in the planned volume of exploitation grants by the end of the CSR period.

However the situation is more complicated than this statement implies. We have therefore sought to explain that the full impact will be felt in different

areas over different timescales. We have also sought to put these cuts into perspective. As we set out in a briefing note we provided to the Committee the cut in the volume, as measured by the number of postdoctoral researcher assistants (PDRAs) funded, of new particle physics and astronomy exploitation grants is 25% compared with the level of growth which PPARC had planned. However in Astronomy, if comparison were made between the actual number of PDRAs funded in 2005/06 and the number we expected to fund in 2010/11, these would be essentially the same. In Particle Physics the situation is further complicated by the fact that rolling grants contain support both for the exploitation of and the construction of facilities, so the number of PDRAs is also affected by the ebb and flow as projects come and go. Overall it is our view that the planned levels of exploitation grants will allow a good return on previous investment and that the balance between exploitation and construction is correct.

We have separately described the beneficial impact the additional funding of FEC will have on the number of staff supported by the STFC. Whilst we believe this analysis is of value we recognise that it may have overly complicated the picture and given the impression that we were down-playing the impact. This was not the intent.

Conclusion 18

The organisational review which will be published and made available to the Committee will outline our action plans for improvement in the area of communications

Conclusion 21

These benchmarking reviews were intended to provide me with external independent advice on the current quality and competitiveness of our in-house research activities and help me take a view on what changes might be necessary to ensure it was resourced at the appropriate level.

In agreeing the terms of reference with the Panels I considered it important that their reports to me should be in confidence since they were being asked to comment on the performance of our staff and such reviews must be handled sensitively.

It was never intended that they should be secretive in the sense that it was always my intention to make the outcome of these one off reviews known to the management and staff of the in-house research teams being reviewed in deciding how we should plan for these activities moving forward.

I decided and agreed to make them more publicly available in the interests of transparency but only on condition that they were suitably anonymised. In conclusion may I welcome the contribution which the Committee has made in developing our understanding of the impact of our CSR settlement. There are clearly lessons to be learned particularly in relation to consultation and

communications and we will do so. I very much look forward to engaging with the Committee on how we can best support and develop the UK's research base.

Sincerely

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