

INNOVATION, UNIVERSITIES, SCIENCE & SKILLS COMMITTEE

Select Committee Announcement

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SCIENCE BUDGET ALLOCATIONS

The Government must “demonstrate greater effectiveness” in the way it manages research in the UK, according to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee. There are concerns that the Government is failing to ensure that Research councils are effectively run, while interfering in how they spend their money.

World-renowned science facilities in the UK face an uncertain future because the Government’s science budget was poorly allocated and left a hole in the finances of a major research funding body.

Management at the newly created Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) then compounded the problem with ineffective and secretive management.

In a report out today (Wednesday 30 April), on the Science Budget Allocations, the Committee expresses concern that despite an increase in the overall Science Budget in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review, the rise does not fully cover Government-determined spending commitments and the STFC, which is responsible for physics and astronomy research funding, has been left with an £80 million shortfall.

In addition, the Committee found the STFC poorly managed, with a weak peer review system and lamentable communications. It has left many in the science community in the dark about their employment prospects and some of the UK’s most respected science institutions, such as the Jodrell Bank observatory and the Daresbury laboratory in Cheshire, facing an uncertain future. The Committee concludes that there are “serious questions about the role and performance of the Chief Executive, especially his ability to retain the confidence of the scientific community as well as to carry through the necessary changes”.

The Committee is also concerned about the influence Government appears to have on the use of the science budget, even though the cornerstone of science funding in the UK, the Haldane Principle, asserts that detailed decisions on how to spend the Science Budget should be made by scientists rather than politicians.

The Committee is calling for:

Substantial and urgent changes to the way the STFC is run in order to restore confidence and to give the Council the leadership it desperately needs.

No decision to be made on where cuts should occur until a Government Commissioned review of physics, the Wakeham Review, has reported.

STFC to take immediate steps to communicate clearly and comprehensively to its research community the impact of its grant cuts.

The Government to publish a white paper on regional science policy as a basis for discussion as a matter of urgency.

MPs are particularly critical of the way the STFC's management has handled decisions to withdraw from, or reduce involvement in, projects, such as the International Linear Collider Gemini Observatories and ground based solar terrestrial physics facilities. The Committee finds these decisions have been taken without proper peer review or full consultation with the scientific community.

The Committee also fears that the UK's international reputation has suffered as a consequence of these decisions and the UK has been left looking like an "unreliable" and "incompetent" international partner.

Chairman of the IUSS committee Phil Willis MP said: "The events of the past few months have exposed serious deficiencies within STFC's senior management, whose misjudgements could still significantly damage Britain's research reputation in this area both at home and abroad."

"Substantial and urgent changes are now needed in the way in which the Council is run in order to restore confidence and to give it the leadership it desperately needs."

Of all STFC's sites, most concern has been raised about the future of Daresbury, in Cheshire.

Mr Willis said: "It is clear that Daresbury's future under the current vision is as a technology and business park. This cuts across previous Government assurances and pronouncements about the importance of Daresbury in Britain's overall strategy of scientific excellence. We want to know how the Government is going to deliver on its promises."

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Committee Membership is as follows:

Mr Phil Willis (*Liberal Democrat, Harrogate and Knaresborough*)(Chairman)
Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (*Labour, City of Durham*)
Mr Tim Boswell (*Conservative, Daventry*)
Mr Ian Cawsey (*Labour, Brigg & Goole*)
Mrs Nadine Dorries (*Conservative, Mid Bedfordshire*)
Dr Ian Gibson (*Labour, Norwich North*)
Dr Evan Harris (*Liberal Democrat, Oxford West & Abingdon*)
Dr Brian Iddon (*Labour, Bolton South East*)
Mr Gordon Marsden (*Labour, Blackpool South*)
Dr Bob Spink (*UK Independence Party, Castle Point*)
Ian Stewart (*Labour, Eccles*)

Mr Graham Stringer (*Labour, Manchester, Blackley*)
Dr Desmond Turner (*Labour, Brighton Kemptown*)
Mr Rob Wilson (*Conservative, Reading East*)

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