

Press Release from representatives of the UK Particle Physics Community

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 AM WEDNESDAY 16th JANUARY

A series of documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act relating to the devastating £80M shortfall in funding for the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) and the subsequent delivery plan announced on December 11th show that the consequences of the settlement should have been known.

Although the headline increase for STFC over this period is 13.6%, the real increase in the resources available to spend on science (known as “near cash”) is only 8% over three years, i.e. only 0.3% above the government’s nominal inflation index. This is by far the lowest near-cash settlement of any Research Council, and the average over all Research Councils is 17%. When liabilities inherited by STFC in April 2007 and running costs for the new Diamond and ISIS facilities at Rutherford Appleton Laboratory are taken into account, even this inflationary increase is wiped out, putting STFC into a so-called “flat-cash” scenario.

In confidential briefing documents sent to officials at The Department of Universities, Innovation and Skills (DIUS) in July and September 2007, STFC say that if a flat cash settlement were imposed “we would have very limited delivery of our objectives and recent investments would be underexploited. We could not operate our facilities at more than the 50% level. Similarly grants would only be funded at 50% of their historic level. Under this scenario, no investment could be made in new initiatives; and exploitation of international subscriptions would be curtailed.”

On November 7th, when the government announced the proposed settlement to the Research Councils, another confidential memo was sent to DIUS officials spelling out the implications of the allocation:

“All of the options being taken forward have the potential for significant programmatic, reputational and political damage, including an adverse and long term impact on the skills agenda. Options for funding to support restructuring are limited and many of the planned actions will require us to make substantial non-cash provision i.e. for redundancies, asset impairment charges etc., for which we have no guaranteed support.”

Dr Brian Cox, The University of Manchester:

“Given that the government cannot have intended this, the question now is to discover whether the mistake was made by officials within DIUS or by STFC itself, and ultimately for the Minister to act immediately to prevent further damage to the laboratories, the Universities and the UKs international scientific reputation.”

Prof. Ken Peach, Director of the John Adams Institute for Accelerator Science:

“The simple message is that STFC is being asked to do much more science using the new world-leading facilities like Diamond, the ISIS 2nd target station and the new Astra/Gemini laser with much less money, and it can’t be done. The scale of redundancies being sought at the Rutherford and Daresbury Laboratories and at the Astronomy Technology Centre in Edinburgh will seriously weaken them, and threaten their long-term viability. Meanwhile, physics departments across the country will suffer

from catastrophic cuts in research programmes, and the UK's international reputation will be seriously damaged. This surely cannot be allowed to happen."

Prof. John Dainton, University of Liverpool:

"It now seems clear that major mistakes have indeed been made in determining the CSR07 settlement for the new STFC. The increase in near cash is barely that of inflation. When combined with the costs of operating and maintaining facilities, and the need to continue to make provision for new investments for future excellence, one immediately sees the implications are a substantial shortfall. It will be a tragedy of monumental significance if the relatively meager, almost invisible, addition to the STFC CSR settlement cannot be found somewhere from the overall UK science budget."

Prof. Swapan Chattopadhyay, Sir John Cockcroft Chair of Physics, Universities of Liverpool, Manchester and Lancaster and Director of the Cockcroft Institute:

"As a newly inducted scientist and scientific leader in the UK, I am grossly disappointed at this state of severe mismanagement of science. I however refuse to believe this to be typical of what I have come to know and respect over years, as the science enterprise in the UK is of the highest calibre and integrity in the world."

Note to editors:

The delivery plan, if implemented, will result in a 25% cut in grants to University physics departments, unilateral withdrawal of the UK from the International Linear Collider project, withdrawal of funding from the Gemini telescopes, significant and damaging redundancies at Daresbury Laboratory near Warrington, Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in Didcot, The Astronomy Technology Centre in Edinburgh and a host of other serious consequences for science in the UK and internationally.

Contact:

Dr. Brian Cox, The University of Manchester,
Prof. Phil Allport, University of Liverpool
Prof. Brian Foster, The University of Oxford
Prof. Mike Green, Royal Holloway University of London
Dr. Mark Lancaster, University College London
Prof. James Stirling, Durham University

<http://www.physics.ox.ac.uk/users/peachk/STFoIC/response-1.htm>

Ed Vaizey MP (Wantage & Didcot) raised a House of Commons adjournment debate on the STFC situation this afternoon, Tuesday 15th January, in Westminster Hall at 13.30. The Innovation, Universities and Skills select committee will take evidence on the STFC situation on Monday 21st January.