

Diamond geezers

DARK days loom for British astronomers and particle physicists, who rue the day their funding body, the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC), merged with the vastly overspent Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils (CCLRC), which used to administer the country's large-scale science facilities.

The resulting Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) has spent a large chunk of its budget on projects such as the huge "Diamond Light" synchrotron in Oxfordshire, which uses particle acceleration to produce light for extreme magnification, letting scientists study materials at atomic level.

The project was well-named because it is expensive – and getting more so. The public accounts committee's recent hearing on Big

Science heard that capital spending on phase II of the synchrotron is now forecast to cost an extra £20m. Worse, the estimated annual

operating costs have almost doubled – from £24m to £46m.

Three members of the STFC, Prof Keith Burnett, Marshall Davies and Prof Richard Wade, are also non-executive directors of Diamond Light Source Ltd, the company that runs the synchrotron. Overlap between the two boards is understandable – STFC is the major shareholder in the joint venture company, which is also part owned by the Wellcome Trust.

However, none of the three lists Diamond in the STFC's register of interests, which requires the

"declaration of any personal or business interest, direct or indirect, monetary or non-monetary, that may conceivably conflict with the interest of the STFC". Members list their involvement in numerous

other projects, committees and academic

departments that are funded by STFC.

Given just how much extra funding

Diamond is now getting, while other facilities face severe

cuts, shouldn't their

divided loyalties be listed? Meanwhile, the STFC is left

with an £80m shortfall. It has already

announced withdrawal from the Gemini Observatory partnership and the International Linear Collider project, while severe cuts to research grants will leave many physics departments struggling.

