

Transcript of the Today Programme

07:05 news bulletin

Newsreader: Leading physicists are angry at what they say is a shortfall of £80 million in their research budget. The STFC will see a 13% increase in funding over the next 3 years, but the rising cost in building new facilities means that jobs could be under threat.

Pallab Ghosh: Physicists are bracing themselves for funding cuts and job losses in areas which they lead the world. Part of the problem is that no extra provision has been made for the cost overruns of building and running new prestige research facilities such as the Diamond synchrotron near Oxford. As a result I understand that there are likely to be cuts across the STFC's entire research programme, including particle physics, astronomy and laser physics. It is also feared that several hundred highly qualified scientists could lose their jobs. One researcher told me that he was concerned that the UK would end up with some of the finest facilities in the world without enough scientists and funding to fully exploit them.

07:22 feature

SM: University physics departments are facing such big cuts in funding, they say research projects will have to be abandoned and jobs will be lost. The STFC which allocates funding is short by £80 million. It will say today which universities are to lose out. The shortage appears to be down to the fact that the council didn't ask the government for enough money.

Dr Brian Cox is from the Department of Physics at the University of Manchester. Good morning.

BC: Good morning

SM: Is that the reason for the problem?

BC: Well we do believe that this is some kind of mistake somewhere in government. I mean, just to set the scene, STFC is the council that funds fundamental physics...big physics...so when we hear these stories about extra solar planets and life on planets we're looking for round the stars, or the LHC at CERN that will recreate the conditions just after the big bang...all these big important research projects – they are funded by STFC and there seems to have been some problem...I would say it was a mistake somewhere...and so I don't believe for one minute that the government intends to hit physics. They have been quite a friend actually to science in general over the last 10 years and we've had no hint of any change in that attitude. So it seems that a mistake's been made and the minister...Ian Pearson is the Minister who has ultimate responsibility for this...will hopefully have to step up and rectify it.

SM: Well I will be speaking to him in a moment, but let's be clear, this council, the part of government that was only set up in this year to oversee funding, is 80 million short - which means what?

BC: All that appears to be true and so it could mean a whole swathe of things. There are big facilities like the Diamond Light Source in Oxford that will allow people to peer into the heart of living cells, so that kind of physics, so there could be an attack on that, but what we've heard is that the attack will fall on what I suppose I the 'soft target' which is the physics departments. You see STFC not only funds research, but they also fund the people who teach physics in these big departments. Now the government has recognised that physics departments are vital to the economy, so it really...this is where the cuts lie. And 25% remember, that's a huge cut for anyone to bear. We think it will affect physics more broadly in the UK.

[SM introduces IP]

SM: Can you step in and help out with 80 million?

IP: Well let me put this in context first Sarah, what we've seen is significant investment in science by the government over the last 10 years and the science budget is actually going up over the next 3 years.

SM: But they are short 80 million, can you help them out?

IP: Well, as I say, the science budget is going up by 13.6% over the next 3 year...

SM: So you're not going to help them out with the extra 80 million?

IP: Well we have concerns about the STFC's budgetary proposals and we've been discussing that with them over the last few days and weeks and there clearly are problems and its one of the reasons why, although we don't get interfering with the detail, because we respect what's known as the Haldane Principle* which has been in place for many years.

** The Haldane Principle in British research policy is the idea that decisions about what to spend research funds on should be made by researchers rather than politicians. It is named after Richard Burdon Haldane, who in 1904 and from 1909-1918 chaired committees and commissions which recommended this policy.*

And I think in the light of this and the delivery plans are going to be outlined by all the Research Councils today. I've asked Ian Diamond, Chair of RCUK, to review support for physics which is a key part of our agenda on STEM (Science Technology and Engineering)

SM: So are you going to review support – to what end? That you will be able to help them out with the 80 million shortfall or not?

IP: Well let's put this in context again, the STFC...

SM: ...Forgive me Mr Pearson, we've heard that and we've also heard that a lot of physicists across the country ad universities are going to be affected - they're going to lose their jobs, departments are going to lose 25% of their budgets - so I'm just looking for some sort of answer from you as to whether you are going to helps them out?

IP: Well I'm concerned about that Sarah, the STFC has got a budget of £1.9 billion...

SM: So 80 million is a relatively small – will you be able to help them out?

IP: We will have to see what the review says but certainly the health of the different disciplines, physics in particular, is something of concern to us and that's why...

SM: SO you'll do what you can to try and help them out and get the extra money?

IP: Well nobody wants to see physics hit hard Sarah and this government has invested a lot in our STEM agenda and we've invested a lot in major facilities such as Diamond over the years...

SM: Yes, well I'm just trying to ascertain whether there isn't any more, or whether you'll try to find the little extra bit

IP: Well who can predict what the future of the review will come up with Sarah, let's just get this into overall prospective – science spending is going up to 4 billion by 2010-11 – a big increase...

SM: Ian Pearson, thank you very much

08:05 news bulletin (*new info in italics*)

Newsreader: Leading physicists are angry at what they say is a shortfall of £80 million in their research budget. The STFC will see a 13% increase in funding over the next 3 years, but the rising cost in building new facilities means that jobs could be under threat.

This morning, the government promised to review the situation.

Pallab Ghosh: *If the £80 million shortfall remains, then leading scientists fear that there will be deep cuts in research programmes and hundreds of scientists could lose their jobs. The problem seems to have arisen because no extra provision had been made for the cost of overruns of building and running new prestige research facilities such as the Diamond synchrotron near Oxford. I understand that despite repeated requests, the government refused to make up the shortfall. But speaking on this programme, the Science Minister Ian Pearson, said that the government would now review the funding arrangements although he wouldn't be drawn on whether this would mean that he was sympathetic to the problems which the physics community currently faces.*