

Astronomers write of “no confidence” in council

┌ The Royal Astronomical Society has sent a strongly-worded letter to Keith Mason, chief executive of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, expressing no confidence in the organisation’s management.

Fellows at the society have recently been frustrated by their senior members’ refusal to adopt a clear stance against the STFC’s decision to cut academic physics grants. But the council now warns Mason in no uncertain terms that the community is “deeply pessimistic and angry” about the situation.

Council members state in the letter that that the astronomers have lost faith in the STFC’s commitment to their work, and warns that that it cannot trust the decisions made by STFC officials if they come from behind closed doors.

“In its actions since it was formed, STFC has failed to pay sufficient attention to the part of its mission associated with the delivery of first class science in astronomy, particle physics and nuclear physics,” the council states.

It goes on to say that “the STFC’s delivery plan pays lip-service to the need to foster the UK academic community,” and that this is exposed as a fallacy by a 25 per cent funding cut “with no sign of any intention or even desire to level this out in later years”.

They write that the STFC “failed miserably” to communicate their plan to physicists, instead insisting that those involved in producing the delivery plan were not permitted discuss their intentions with the community.

The community only found out that the council had failed to secure enough money from the government to maintain its full programme when the plan was published in December.

The letter adds that this lack of transparency is only confounded by the lack of an advisory structure below the level of PPAN, the committee which advises the STFC council on its priorities.

The council takes the view that the STFC failed to make ministers “sufficiently aware” of the consequences a flat cash settlement would have on its ability to fund physics research and that maintaining a “take-it-or-leave-it approach to international partnerships” rather than negotiating with groups such Gemini is doomed to fail.

The group call on the council to formulate a clear science strategy, and to do so in close communication with the scientific community.

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