

Pearson dismisses talk of STFC crisis : Research Fortnight : Feb 21

There is no crisis in physics funding and the Science and Technology Facilities Council's £80 million deficit is a "myth", Ian Pearson, the minister for science and innovation told the House of Commons Innovation Universities and Skills Committee this morning.

At an evidence session on the science budget allocations in which he was joined by Keith O'Nions, the director general for science and innovation, Pearson suggested that the £80m figure was more a representation of the money the council had hoped to be awarded rather than what they were due. He rejected the suggestion that the particle physics and astronomy community were in crisis and told the committee that the uproar over the STFC's settlement was due more to negative portrayal amongst the wider community than based on the real facts.

The minister insisted that the same number of grants would be awarded in the next three years as in the last three years and that it was crucial not to underestimate the importance of full economic costing, which may have soaked up much of the councils' allocations but means that individual grants are worth a lot more to universities.

Pearson rejected a suggestion from Phil Willis, the Liberal Democrat MP for Harrogate and committee chairman, that he was "shell shocked" by the reception the STFC settlement had received in the Commons.

"I don't pretend that some councils didn't have to make difficult decisions, but that's the way of things," Pearson said. He later added "it isn't the government's responsibility to decide how the research councils spend their money." He also confirmed that the Natural Environment Research Council could well pick up the tab for the ground based solar terrestrial physics projects that were dropped from the STFC's agenda, as long as it considers this type of research to fit with its own priorities.

The Committee expressed particular concern about the future of the Daresbury laboratory, home to the Cockcroft Institute and the Synchrotron Radiation Source. Willis said Pearson's purported support of these projects was just "hot air". He told him that when the committee visited the facility on Monday, its employees told them they see a bleak future ahead and that many were already making plans to move on from the site.

Pearson admitted that the decision not to pursue the Fourth Generation Light Source project had caused difficulties in the interim. But he repeatedly insisted that the government is committed to making Daresbury a "world class science and innovation campus" and that he hoped that when more solid plans are in place to develop the next light source, it would be constructed at Daresbury. He reminded the committee that a recent STFC press release had promised that no mandatory redundancies outside of the planned closures would be made at the campus.

Evan Harris, Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West and Abingdon, was unimpressed by the revelation. "Surely you don't believe everything that is written in press releases do you?" he asked, before warning the minister that staff at Cockcroft had told him that they no longer believe the STFC wants to support them. "Daresbury is going through a transition, there is no doubt about that," the minister replied.

Turning to the other research councils, Pearson said that he had been very surprised when the Arts and Humanities Research Council predicted that it would have to fund significantly fewer postgraduate grants in the next three years to accommodate for FEC. He suggested that there was no indication of this in the council's delivery plan and that the government intends to investigate the matter.

While the committee was generally satisfied that the Medical Research Council had been awarded an adequate CSR settlement, its members expressed grave concerns about a raid conducted last year on its commercial fund by the Treasury. This, they warned, has left it £92 million short of the money it had hoped to invest in the UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation and sends out a very contradictory message about supporting the commercialisation of research.

Pearson confirmed that the Treasury were looking again at the rules but that it was unlikely to change its plans to allow the councils to keep their predicted income and 20 per cent extra before taking the rest for its own coffers.

**** A petition asking the government to make up the £80m shortfall in the STFC's budget has been signed by 17,489 people.