

Facilities Council admits problems in management and consultation

The Science and Technology Facilities Council plans to establish advisory panels after receiving heavy criticism over its failure to consult on funding cuts made in the wake of the 2007 comprehensive spending review. The panels will advise on decisions of the Council's science board. However, no changes are planned for the composition of its council, which has come under fire for failing to adequately represent the diverse needs of the scientific community.

Keith Mason, chief executive of the STFC, said that the move was part of ongoing efforts to improve the decision making processes at the research council.

Giving evidence to the House of Commons Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee as part of its inquiry into science budget allocations, Mason said he had been unhappy with the management structure of the STFC since its inception in April 2007. He accepted that the scientific community felt their views were not taken into account when the council put together its delivery plan, but insisted that efforts are underway to make the system more "responsive".

Earlier in the month, the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society complained that the STFC had "failed miserably" to communicate the content of its delivery plan and had made a "catastrophic error" by failing to establish an advisory panel to present scientists' views to PPAN, the committee which advises the STFC council on priorities. Mason told the committee that such a panel would now be established.

However, the chief executive defended his "slim look" council, which has 10 members where the other research councils have between 14 and 17, on the grounds that a smaller group is more efficient.

Swapan Chattopadhyay, director of the Cockcroft Institute at the Daresbury Laboratory, told the committee that he had lost faith in the STFC since so many of the facilities located at Daresbury are now in doubt.

Mason admitted that the critical mass of expertise that has served to attract research talent to Daresbury would be reduced in the short-term, but insisted it would soon prove a "shining example" of scientific excellence.

The STFC science board is to hold a town meeting on 3 March, to present a more detailed breakdown of planned cuts to its programme over the spending review period.