

STFC admits fears over currency costs

□ Different funding mechanisms must be explored to prevent currency fluctuations from damaging the UK science base, the Science and Technology Facilities Council has said.

In its response to the physics review currently being conducted by Bill Wakeham, vice-chancellor of the University of Southampton, the council says that "enhanced flexibility" is needed to cover the costs of international subscriptions. These have risen dramatically in the past year due to the falling pound.

Recent changes to the science funding arrangements have meant that the council now has to cover the cost of currency fluctuations from its own budget. Previously the money was taken directly from the science budget. This has meant that the STFC has had to make cutbacks to other areas of its programme to meet subscription charges to facilities such as CERN, the European Space Agency and the European Southern Observatory.

It now argues "there is limited flexibility and potentially serious impact to the domestic programme arising from fluctuations in currency exchange rates and GDP levels, which are obviously beyond our control." This problem must therefore be dealt with through more flexible funding arrangements, it says.

However, the council stops short of calling on the government to revert to the former arrangements or to simply cover currency fluctuations at a higher level to prevent science programmes from being slashed.

The STFC also calls for increased emphasis on economic returns when funding decisions are made in order to increase the impact of physics. It stresses that this does not equate to assessing the impact of individual projects but rather ensures that the "system as a whole" delivers on that goal.

Other sites STFC announcement.