

STFC to undergo review, but management positions safe

▮ The Science and Technologies Facilities Council has agreed to commission a full review of its operations in the wake of the 2007 comprehensive spending review, but the government has said that to replace top officials at the council would be "disruptive."

In its response to the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee's report on the 2007 science budget allocations, the government admits that work needs to be done to improve communication at the STFC but has rejected calls from the committee to force senior STFC leaders to resign.

The committee had said in its original support that high-level staff at the council had lost the confidence of scientists and needed to be replaced.

It also accused the government of meddling in research council agendas, which it considered to be in contradiction with the Haldane principle, which separates the research councils's funding decisions from direct political control. Specific complaints were made over a sudden switch of funding away from postgraduate grants at the Arts and Humanities Research Council and promises from science minister Ian Pearson to support the Daresbury science campus because of its regional location, even though projects at the site had been largely cut from the STFC's programme.

The government denied the suggestion that it has been "micromanaging" research council programmes and said that AHRC received words of advice like all the other councils but that there was no pressure on it to act on the government's wishes. Regarding Daresbury, the government insists that national and regional policies can be aligned without breaching the Haldane principle.

In another part of its response, the government criticised the committee for its comments about the quality of the peer review system established by the STFC, which it dismisses as "unhelpful and damaging".

However, it did agree with the committee that the Science Budget should be renamed the Science and Research Budget to reflect the inclusion of non-science work.

Phil Willis, Liberal Democrat chairman of the committee, said that it was pleased about the review but concerned that the government has ignored calls to hold back on cuts to the STFC programme until Bill Wakeham submits his report on the health of physics in the UK.

"The Committee made clear the need for wait for the Wakeham Review to be completed," he said. "And whilst we welcome the urgent review which the Secretary of State has ordered, it is important that that Wakeham Review is concluded before a final decision is made."