

Up front

Scientists demand transparency during facilities council consultation

Physicists have told the Science and Technology Facilities Council's Science Board that they intend to carefully monitor the progress of its programmatic review following misgivings about the transparency of decisions made by the council.

Peter Knight, the board's chairman, presided over a town meeting in London on 3 March during which the two main STFC advisory bodies, PPAN and PALS, presented lists of projects they assessed as high, medium and low priorities. These recommendations, which are based on scientific worth, rather than financial or political merit, will be presented to the STFC council before it defines its final investment strategy.

Projects on the two lower priority lists are in grave danger of being dropped when the new programme takes effect on 1 April. These include ground-based solar terrestrial physics, the Fourth Generation Light Source at Daresbury and upgrades to the ISIS and ILL neutron sources.

Knight told attendees that they have three weeks to respond to a consultation on the lists, after which, their views would be considered by nine panels of independent experts.

As well as expressing some alarm over the short timeframe that has been set for the exercise, those present were troubled to hear that the nine panels have yet to be appointed.

They warned that recent experiences with the council have led them to be suspicious of decisions made behind closed doors. In light of these feelings, several asked that all submissions to the consultation be made available in the public domain and that the community should be given an input into how the panels are made up.

Despite asking "don't you trust us?" Knight agreed that these were sensible suggestions and invited them to begin making recommendations for the panels immediately.

Walter Gear, the PPAN chair, told the gathering that his team had been "outraged" and "disgusted" by the extent of the cuts that had to be made but that they had felt unable to recommend a reinvestment in university grants once the project priorities had been outlined.

Michael Rowan-Robinson, president of the Royal Astronomical Society, warned the council that the decision making process was being rushed and that some exciting projects could easily be overlooked based on the current lists. He added that his group has not given up hope that extra funding could be teased out of the government to fill the STFC's £80 million funding hole.