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Wakeham can't save you, physicists told

STFC decision no mistake, and DIUS has 'no plans' to U-turn

Astronomers and particle physicists were told by the research councils to abandon hope that planned cuts in their funding can be reversed by a new review of physics at a hearing in the House of Commons late on Monday.

Alarmed by the prospect of the Science and Technology Facilities Council making big cuts not only to facilities but also to grants and consequently jobs in university departments, physicists have been pressing for interim support of £20 million and for final spending decisions to be put off until a review of physics by John Wakeham reports in the autumn.

But Keith Mason, chief executive of the STFC, and Ian Diamond, chairman of the Research Councils UK executive group, told MPs that the Wakeham review would make no difference to budgets over the next three years.

"It's not an option to wait for the review before decisions are made," Mason told the select committee that shadows the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

The clarification emerged as Phil Willis, the Committee's Liberal Democrat chairman, asked whether the government was using the Wakeham review as a "smokescreen" for its decision to cut the STFC's funding for physics.

The hearing revealed a gulf in analysis between the research councils—who portrayed the STFC's problems as the consequence of deliberate, fixed decisions—and some physicists—who argued the cuts were a slip that could now be undone.

Michael Rowan-Robinson, president of the Royal Astronomical Society, told the committee he believed the situation at the STFC was the result of "mistakes" made by the government and the research council.

By contrast, Mason—while emphasising that "this is not a blame situation"—said ministers at DIUS were fully aware that his council's settlement in the three-year Comprehensive Spending Review would result in dramatic losses to physics.

A memo obtained by a group of particle physicists last week revealed that the STFC had warned DIUS in November that "all of the options being taken forward have the potential for significant programmatic, reputational and political damage, including an adverse and long term impact on the skills agenda".

But Mason defended the government's decision, telling the MPs he accepted that the Medical Research Council should get the lion's share of CSR allocations.

Earlier, Peter Main, the Institute of Physics director of science, explained that the IoP was calling on the government to offer physics departments around £20 million in extra funding to tide them over until Wakeham's group could file its report.

Main said the cash could be taken from the the other research councils. Evan Harris, the Liberal Democrat science spokesman, also suggested that such a plan would offer the STFC a way out of its £80m hole.

DIUS told Research Fortnight on Friday that it has "no plans" to ask the other councils for any money, a standard Whitehall reply that stops one step short of ruling out such a move. Some physicists may also be encouraged by the fact that ministers have declined to say they were adequately briefed on the consequences of the STFC's budget settlement.

But Ed Vaizey, the Conservative MP for Wantage, home to the Diamond Light Source, says Ian Pearson, the science minister, may have irreparably damage himself in a Commons debate on 15 January.

"He has just stonewalled on this issue in the face of incontrovertible facts,"

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Vaizey says. "As an opposition politician, I sat there happily watching a government minister dig his own grave. But as someone who cares passionately about what happens to my constituents and the wider scientific community, I was intensely depressed."

The MPs have yet to decide on further hearings on the subject.

by Laura Hood lanews@ResearchResearch.com

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