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10,500 sign petition to reverse cuts to science

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By **Zoe Corbyn**

Academics say research will suffer as fear of job cuts and privatisation grows. Zoe Corbyn reports.

More than 10,500 people have signed a petition protesting against cuts in physics and astronomy, which they say "risks relegating the UK to second-tier involvement in future research".

Among the signatories to a Downing Street website petition against cuts by the Science and Technology Facilities Council is Stephen Hawking, one of the world's most eminent physicists.

The protests continued to build as Prospect, the scientists' union, warned that the STFC's plans to deal with its £80 million funding shortfall meant that hundreds of public-sector scientists could lose their jobs and major public research facilities could be privatised.

Union representatives met with council officials last month to discuss STFC plans to cut research programmes at its Daresbury and Rutherford Appleton laboratories and at the Astronomy Technology Centre (ATC) based at the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh.

Voluntary redundancy schemes have been put in place, but the union said that if reorganisation plans failed, there could be hundreds of job losses. "(Staff) do not understand the council's decisions or its vision for the future," said Tony Bell, Prospect's national secretary.

The plans are part of efforts to save Pounds 120 million over three years following the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review. The review has left the council Pounds 80 million in the red, obliging it to make cuts to astronomy and physics projects and to make a 25 per cent cut to research grant funding. The STFC is also trying to shave Pounds 40 million off its budget to give it flexibility for new projects, which the union has branded "unnecessary".

Mr Bell said STFC staff feared that the ATC and Daresbury could be transferred to a private company or university. "The STFC says it is looking at different business models - the fear is that it means getting rid of them," he told *Times Higher Education*.

The STFC plan includes exploring "alternative options" for running the ATC and aims to "move rapidly to ... joint venture model(s)" for both its Harwell and Daresbury science and innovation campuses. The STFC declined to comment on cuts to its own laboratories.

The cuts have caught the attention of MPs and central Government. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills has commissioned a review of the health of physics, and the Parliamentary Select Committee that shadows the DIUS is holding a session on 21 January. Many physicists and astronomers worry, however, that the review will come too late to save their subjects.

Meanwhile, others question whether it was right to merge the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council with the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils to form the STFC given that the budget shortfall was in effect inherited from the CCLRC.

"I don't think the PPARC council would have gone along with the merger if it had realised this would be the outcome," said Roger Davies, head of physics at the University of Oxford and a former PPARC council member.

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