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Transcript of an interview about the shortfall in STFC funding

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Interviewee: Dr Brian Cox University of Manchester
Clips of: Ed Vaizey MP
Ian Pearson MP

SM: Physics research is facing a funding crisis. You may remember we told you before Christmas about an £80 million black hole in the budget of the STFC, that's the main funding body for research into physics and astronomy in the UK. Some of the documents that passed between the research council and the Department for Innovation, have come to light as a result of the freedom of information request by the physicists themselves; our science correspondent Tom Feilden has seen them. Now, Tom what are these documents?

TF: Well the documents include two of the Powerpoint presentations staff at the STFC gave to officials at the Department for Innovation in March and September last year and there is also an internal memo that lists all the communications between the department, who was told what and when. Now we know the STFC was awarded a 13.6% increase over four years, which is of course, quite a lot of money, but the Council is already committed to funding a series of big infrastructure projects, and when you allow for these and the ongoing r costs of its existing facilities, there is really only 8% of this settlement left to finance research grants and academic salaries and that is a lot less than the Council was expecting. That is where this £80 million black hole we reported last year comes from and I understand that letters seeking people for voluntary redundancies have already gone out to a series of laboratories across the country.

SM: So do these documents that have come to light, give any indication of who is to blame for the funding problems?

TF: Well it is fiendishly complicated, but there was this question about whether this funding shortfall really was meant or was a mistake, and if it was a mistake, who might have made it. What the documents show is that the STFC presented four funding scenarios to officials, one with a cut of about 5%, the second a flat rate budget and then two assuming 5% and 10% increases. Now it is clear the council did spell out what the implications a flat rate settlement would be. A presentation in March spoke about the 'very limited delivery of our objectives, recent investments being underexploited' and it makes clear grants would have to be cut. So Ministers were warned of the consequences of flat rate settlement, a point that was picked up on by the MP Ed Vaizey in a debate on the crisis at Westminster yesterday. *Clip*

EV: "Now I don't blame the government entirely, I certainly know that there is a great deal of frustration at the way the Science and Technology Funding Council has gone about its business, but at its heart lies the fact that government has told the scientific community that they have got a generous settlement, when every single fact tells us that they have got a flat cash settlement and that is why they are having to make cuts".

SM: Tom, what has the government got to say about this?

TF: Well Ian Pearson responded for the government and he firmly repeated the line that he took on this programme last December. He said the settlement was an extremely generous one and that it was up to the STFC to decide how it wanted to allocate its resources. *Clip*

IP: "I have to again restate the basic facts STFC's budget is going up over the next three years, it will rise by 13.6% by the end of the CSR period which amounts to an additional £185 million, and a total budget to the STFC of £1.9 billion".

SM: Well Tom Feilden, thank you very much. Dr Brian Cox is from the Department of Physics and Astronomy from the University of Manchester, good morning. What do you make of what the problem is here?

BC: Well there is one misconception that should be nailed straight away, this 13.6% number, you only get that if you use some very arcane, Treasury and Government accounting rules. The increase in actual cash ….so the money you can spend, is 8% over three years, which is essentially 0% after inflation. Now to set the scale if you look at the other Research Councils, Bio-tech got 18%, Economics and Social Research 20%, Arts and Humanities 12%, by far the lowest (is STFC) and hereby lie the roots of the problem.

Now there are only two scenarios as far as we can see, one is some kind of mistake because STFC asked for 5% a year in order to deliver on their mission, now that is about 15% over three years, they got 13.6%, but when you look at what they actually got it was 8%, so that is rather complicated.

The other scenario is that a mistake has been made, the government thought that they were providing STFC with enough money, but in fact they didn't and there is a damming quote in the Freedom of Information documents we received, that says, that it was from STFC to the government on the 7th of November, so before all this was announced. It says all the options being taken forward have the potential for significant programmatic, reputational and political damage, including adverse and long term impacts on the skills agenda. Now the government must have seen that, the Minister should have seen that because it

was available in his department, he either signed up to that, or a mistake has been made.

SM: What do you think it is?

BC: I cannot believe, that this government, that has, to be fair to them, overseen a strong increase in science budgets, signed up to that memo, so I possibly believe, we have run these by some senior sources at STFC by the way, so strange that it may seem it is possible that a simple mistake was made, so…

SM: A simple mistake which means what?

BC: Well it means is exactly what that memo said, it means that, there is another memo here actually…

SM: (interrupts) Give us an idea of the scale of problems that Physics will see as a result of this mistake.

BC: Well a 25% at least cut in research grants in Physics and Astronomy, now when you know that Physics underpins something like 6.4% of UK GDP we are talking about a £70 billion a year industry that is underpinned by this basic research, then you can see that the consequences are incredibly serious. There is already evidence actually, anecdotal evidence that the number of people applying to do Physics is beginning to reduce the confidence in basic Physics in Britain and the UK's international reputation is being shaken by what could be a simple accountancy mistake.

SM: Do you think that the Government recognises this and will address it?

BC: Well they must recognise it because they have been told (laughs) several times, there has been an enormous campaign both in public, in the media and behind the scenes to inform them at what the damage could be. Now I understand the Minister's position in a sense, I don't think that he intended for this to happen, but if he is just trying to spare a few red faces either at STFC or within his department and…

SM: (Interrupts) Well of course there is no money for anyone at the moment.

BC: Well no, I should say this, we are talking about very small amounts of money, we are talking about, £25 million over three years to completely solve the problem. It is quite remarkable how little money we are actually talking about here it has a big impact because most of the money that is committed is committed to international subscriptions etc which can't be changed.

SM: Dr Brian Cox, Many thanks.

Prepared by Firebird PR