Minutes of the STFC Council meeting

12th March 2026

Virtual meeting

Attendees

Council members:
Michele Dougherty, Chair
Andy Schofield, Senior Independent Member and co-chair
Stan Bentvelsen
David Charlton
Lucy Edge
Patricia Hodgson
JT Janssen
Jana Kolar
Jayne Lawrence
Angeli Moeller
Andrew Pontzen
Hitesh Thakrar
Carsten Welsch

Council Observers:
Julia Sutcliffe, CSA DBT
Keith Grainge, Chair of Science Board (PPAN)
Howard Stone, Chair of Science Board (F&L)
Adrian Belton, incoming Council member
STFC Secretariat

Other attendees:
Chris Wrench, Director of Finance – items 3-6
Roger Eccleston, Exec Director National Labs – items 3-5
STFC Strategy – item 4
Grahame Blair, Exec Director Programmes – item 6

1 Welcome and opening remarks

1.1 Michele Dougherty welcomed Adrian Belton, incoming Council member to the meeting.

1.2 Council gave thanks to Patricia Hodgson for her support and advice to STFC over the past five years and noted that she would finish her term on Council at the end of the month.

1.3 It was noted that Dave Newbold had been elected co-spokesperson for the international DUNE project and had stepped down from the STFC Executive Board.

1.4 Lucy Edge declared a future conflict of interest as she would be providing support to Michele Dougherty in her role as UKRI's responsible officer for Space, which included advising on the development of UKRI's Space strategy and programme.

2 Minutes and Actions from January 2026

2.1 The minutes were approved subject to several amendments.

2.2 It was noted that public versions of the minutes were archived from the UKRI website after two years but were still accessible via the National Archives. It was agreed that an explanatory note would be added to the STFC Council web page.

3 Allocations & Finance update

3.1 Chris Wrench provided a finance update to Council, detailing the STFC spending review allocations and the breakdown of funds under the new UKRI buckets (funding) model.

3.2 Previously the Particle Physics, Astronomy and Nuclear Physics (PPAN) programme formed part of the core programme partition, which included funding for labs, estates, compute and other running costs. The two other partitions were the large multidisciplinary facilities and the international subscriptions.

3.3 Under the new model the PPAN programme was in "bucket one" along with Particle Physics Department, UK Astronomy Technology Centre and the PPAN international subscriptions for CERN, SKA and ESO.

3.4 There were unfunded cost pressures across the spending review period. For PPAN (bucket one) the pressures included the increasing cost base of PPAN grants and large projects as well a very substantial increase in Spectrum Protection. There had not been an increase in STFC's budget to match these increases.

3.5 The largest funding gap was in the enabling platform (bucket four), where significant efficiency savings were required from across the multidisciplinary facilities, estates, compute, engineering and support services as well as increasing income from other funding sources. This was being delivered through the STFC transformation process.

3.6 Measures for managing the budget in 2026/27 included recruitment controls, withholding uncommitted capital, and the expectation of further cost reductions measures.

3.7 Council members asked for clarifications regarding the figures, cost drivers, and implications for programme delivery. It was agreed that there needed to be greater clarity on the cost pressures.

4 Vision for STFC

4.1 Roger Eccleston summarised the evolution of the vision and mission statements, focusing on the dual missions of supporting the PPAN portfolio and operating national laboratories.

4.2 The intention was to consult staff and external stakeholders to enable further refinement. This included engaging with the Science Boards and through one-to-one meetings with key stakeholders, with the aim of finalising the statements for the upcoming STFC partnership summit on 30th April.

4.3 Prioritisation principles had been developed to guide decision-making, linking the vision and mission to strategic priorities.

4.4 Council advised on developing a more inspiring vision for discovery science in the PPAN area and to better showcase the truly unique capabilities and impacts provided by the multidisciplinary facilities.

4.5 Members emphasised the need for greater ambition and to highlight the breadth of science as well as the impact on the skills and economy. The statements needed to be both internally and externally relevant.

5 Update from Science Board Facilities & Labs

5.1 Howard Stone provided an update from the Science Board Facilities and Labs meeting. Key points of note included:

5.1.1 The significant cost pressures faced by the multidisciplinary facilities of Diamond, ISIS and the Central Laser Facility

5.1.2 Science Board was concerned about the viability of these facilities if savings and income targets could not be achieved and emphasised the need for scenario planning and development of fallback plans

5.1.3 Science Board was also concerned about the lack of awareness of the potential impacts amongst the user communities, which were large and diverse, encompassing a breadth of disciplines including engineering, materials, chemistry, medical and biology. It recommended the development of a coordinated communications strategy to manage expectations

5.1.4 The Multidisciplinary Facilities User Panel (a sub-committee of Science Board) was putting the development of a facilities roadmap on hold and would be diverting its focus on the prioritisation

5.2 It was noted that a coordinated communications plan was in place and that updates were being provided at recent and upcoming user community meetings.

5.3 Several Council members expressed concern that the multidisciplinary facilities could be at risk and suggested the development of a long-term vision for the facilities.

6 Update from Science Board Particle Physics, Astronomy & Nuclear Physics (PPAN)

6.1 Keith Grainge provided an update from the Science Board (PPAN) meeting. Key points of note included:

6.1.1 Option of integrating PPAN into EPSRC. Due to the long-term nature of the PPAN projects and the consolidated grants, Science Board strongly recommended that PPAN remained within STFC but with strong partitions in place. Nuclear Physics had previously been in EPSRC but had moved into STFC for these reasons. Science Board was writing a letter to Ian Chapman, UKRI CEO, to highlight their concerns.

6.1.2 Science Board had received input from all five advisory panels, identifying grant lines and early-stage R&D as top priorities, and noted widespread concerns about the robustness and transparency of the prioritisation process.

6.1.3 Update on the PPAN prioritisation process. 48 project pro formas had been received and subcommittee reviews set up to triage into must-continue/at-risk/potential be to stopped categories. Science Board would then develop scenarios for flat cash and 10, 20 and 30% reductions along with impact assessments for each of these.

6.1.4 However, Science Board strongly felt that 30% reductions would be very damaging and it was concerned that the scenarios could be misinterpreted as its recommendations.

6.1.5 It was proposed that the Advisory Panel Chairs and some Council members be invited to the prioritisation meetings as observers.

6.1.6 An international panel review of the prioritisation was also being considered.

6.1.7 Science Board recommended more frequent and transparent communications.

6.1.8 There was a lack of clarity on how PPAN community could influence and access funding programmes from bucket two, particularly in areas where the community could contribute such as quantum, semiconductor/sensors, AI and defence.

6.2 Council discussed the proposed observers at the prioritisation meetings and felt this would aid community representation.

6.3 Council discussed the merit of an international panel and noted that the intent was to provide an independent perspective on the overall strategy rather than to duplicate the Science Board's work.

6.4 Council acknowledged the very difficult task faced by Science Board PPAN and commended all the hard work from the members. Council emphasised the importance of developing the different scenarios and clearly articulating their impacts so that these could be understood and shared with the UKRI Executive and DSIT.

7 Any other business

7.1 It was noted that the next meetings were on 13 and 14 May and 16 July and agreed that an additional meeting would be arranged in June to feed into the prioritisation processes.