Science and Technology Facilities Council

Minutes of the STFC Council Meeting - 14 May 2026

Attendees

Council members:

Michele Dougherty (Chair)

Andy Schofield (SIM)

Adrian Belton

Stan Bentvelsen

David Charlton

JT Janssen

Jana Kolar

Jayne Lawrence

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)

STFC Secretariat

Other attendees:

Item 3: Roger Eccleston, Exec Director National Labs

Item 4-8: Grahame Blair, Exec Director Programmes

Item 6: STFC Head of Nuclear Physics & Particle Astrophysics and Associate Director of Particle Astrophysics, Nuclear Physics and International User Facilities

Item 7 & 11: Christophe Dumas, Director UK ATC

Item 8: Prof Victoria Martin, UoE, Chair of ETCC and Associate Director, Skills & Digital Research Infrastructure

Item 10: STFC Head of Risk & Assurance and UKRI Head of Risk & Assurance

Item 11: STFC-Head of Public Engagement

Apologies:

Angeli Moeller

Lucy Edge

1 Welcome and opening remarks

1.1 Michele Dougherty welcomed everyone to the second day of the meeting and asked for any conflicts of interest.

1.2 Stan Bentvelsen declared an interest in the Gravitational Waves item and it was agreed that he would leave the meeting for the discussion.

1.3 It was noted that Lucy Edge has stepped away from Council for a 6-month period whilst she supported the development of UKRI's Space strategy and programme, and associated engagement with government and other key stakeholders.

2 Minutes and Actions from January 2026 and March 2026

2.1 The minutes were approved subject to minor amendments.

2.2 It was noted that to protect individuals and to comply with data protection advice, the published minutes for 2025 would be updated so that comments would not be attributed to individuals, especially junior staff, whose names would be redacted.

2.3 Most actions were complete or underway.

2.4 Council asked for expedition of the cost pressures explainer.

3 Update from Science Board Facilities & Labs

3.1 Howard Stone provided an update from Science Board F&L. Key points included:

3.1.1 Recruitment was underway for new Science Board members to replace those due to demit at the end of the year.

3.1.2 Science Board wished to stress that clear organisational goals are essential for effective restructuring and prioritisation, to ensure that the board's work aligned with STFC's ambitions.

3.1.3 There was a need to evaluate the value and sustainability of international subscriptions and the role of multidisciplinary facilities (MDFs), seeking clarity from other research councils and to consider the balance between core STFC activities and broader UKRI or industrial activities.

3.1.4 ISIS continued to be the most important neutron source for most UK users. In addition to supporting a broad range of disciplines, it contributed an estimated £1.4 billion in net economic benefit and a 214% return on investment.

3.1.5 If ISIS was closed, then combined with ILL's anticipated closure in 2033, this would reduce the UK neutron user capacity by 95%, with no existing or emerging international sources able to fill the gap.

3.1.6 Science Board was concerned about the lack of effective communication with the facilities user communities regarding potential impacts of the prioritisation outcomes.

3.2 Council asked about the remaining lifetime of ISIS, noting that this was at least 20 years and discussed various access models that might apply to the ISIS facility.

4 Update from Science Board PPAN

4.1 Keith Grainge provided an update from Science Board PPAN. Key points included:

4.1.1 Science highlight - award of the Breakthrough Prize in Fundamental Physics to work done on the anomalous magnetic moment of a muon.

4.1.2 He, Michele Dougherty and Grahame Blair had undertaken a lot of engagement with the PPAN community over the past few months.

4.1.3 Science Board PPAN development of scenarios was ongoing, but there were several areas that required clarification such as costing models for the UKATC and Particle Physics Department.

4.1.4 STFC's budget was vulnerable to exposure to currency fluctuations and Science Board considers some form of 'Drayson' partitions to be essential.

4.2 Council discussed maintaining the future health of the PPAN programme and noted that under current constraints there wasn't headroom to support emerging areas. It was difficult making strategic decisions on a short spending review cycle and worth considering the programme over a longer, 20-year timescale. It was suggested that this could be something that Science Board PPAN might look at next year.

4.3 Council also discussed the potential impact on university partners and the risk of eroding trust and long-term collaboration.

5 Science Board PPAN Chair/Deputy appointment

5.1 Council noted the recent selection process for Science Board Chair and Deputy Chair of Science Board PPAN and approve the appointment of:

5.1.1 Professor Gavin Davies (Imperial, Particle Physicist) as the Chair of SB PPAN.

5.1.2 Professor Seb Oliver (University of Sussex, Astronomer) as the Deputy Chair of SB PPAN.

5.2 Diversity was discussed and it was noted that the previous two Science Board PPAN chairs prior to Keith Grainge had been female.

6 Review of Gravitational Waves

6.1 Stan Bentvelsen recused himself from the meeting for the discussion.

6.2 Council was presented with an overview of the UK's involvement in gravitational waves research.

6.2.1 The UK had longstanding involvement in LIGO. An International Gravitational Waves Network (IGWN) had formed to coordinate global efforts, with the UK maintaining a leading role in detector development and data analysis.

6.2.2 The UK was involved in early-stage technology development and governance planning for the Einstein Telescope, with the University of Glasgow playing a key role. Future participation would depend on international funding arrangements and project maturity.

6.2.3 With future projects requiring significant investment; the community was currently focusing on incremental upgrades (A sharp) due to funding limitations.

6.3 Council members debated how to prioritise scientific capabilities, noting that gravitational waves ranked very highly in recent scientific prioritisation, but that current funding cycles and lack of headroom prevented strategic investment in growth areas.

7 Update on UK Astronomy Technology Centre (UKATC)

7.1 The Director of UKATC joined the meeting and provided an update on UKATC. Key points included:

7.1.1 UKATC designed and built advanced instrumentation for ground and space observatories. It had leadership roles in major international projects including the Extremely Large Telescope (European Southern Observatory), ALMA, the MIRI detector on the James Web Space Telescope, and LISA (ESA gravitational waves mission). UKATC worked in partnership with UK and international agencies and universities.

7.1.2 UKATC's mission was being revised to better reflect alignment with national industrial and economic growth strategies, and the centre was pursuing increased external funding to reduce reliance on STFC budgets.

7.1.3 The centre was actively developing and adopting disruptive technologies such as AI, machine learning, and next-generation photon-counting detectors.

7.1.4 A technical challenge was the development of high-contrast imaging for the Habitable World Observatory to enable exoplanet detection.

7.1.5 Collaboration with other STFC labs, particularly RAL Space, was being strengthened to share resources in mechanical engineering and design assurance, aiming to standardise skills and improve operational efficiency.

8 Education, Training & Careers Committee (ETCC) update

8.1 The Chair of ETCC joined the meeting and provided an update. Key points included:

8.1.1 The role and membership of ETCC.

8.1.2 A separate subgroup called the Student Algorithm Task and Finish Group had been set up to advise on the algorithm for allocating doctoral awards.

8.1.3 The process for collecting and reviewing EDI statements from research organisations nominating Ernest Rutherford Fellows had been refined.

8.1.4 ETCC clarified that the Ernest Rutherford Fellowship scheme welcomed hardware and software-focused applicants, and the assessment criteria were being adjusted to ensure inclusivity.

8.1.5 The committee continued to support long-term attachments and summer schools.

8.2 Council expressed the need to monitor the impact of revisions to the studentship algorithm and noted that some EDI data wasn't captured in the new funding system (TFS).

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Council had lunch with UK ATC staff

9 Exec Chairs Update

9.1 Michele Dougherty provided an update on the development of funding scenarios and next steps

9.1.1 The current timelines were to develop options by the end of June to be presented to Patrick Vallance and Ian Chapman, followed by UKRI ExCo and Board reviews in July. Final sign-off and communications were planned for the autumn.

9.2 Council discussed the challenges and noted that each 'red line' imposed by decision makers reduced the available options. Council emphasised the need for clear articulation of the consequences of constraints with supporting materials to communicate the impacts. It also offered to provide a statement of support.

9.3 It was noted that input was being sought from the UKRI Facilities Strategic Advisory Group (FSAG).

10 Update on risk and risk management

10.1 UKRI Head of Risk & Assurance and STFC Head of Risk & Assurance provided an overview of risk management Frameworks at UKRI and STFC. Key points included:

10.1.1 UKRI’s risk management framework, included strategy, policy, process, and a risk appetite statement. Principal risks were reviewed with the UKRI Executive committee, Audit and Risk Committee, and Board, and were published in the annual report. The framework used a risk quadrant to categorise risks and a heat map to visualise their status relative to risk appetite.

10.1.2 Each principal risk had a single named owner and manager, with oversight at the Executive Committee level. Michele was the risk owner for the infrastructure risk at UKRI level.

10.1.3 STFC's risk management process operated at three levels: project, department, and corporate. Risks were escalated based on significance and control effectiveness, with regular reviews and an STFC risk community group. The risk register had recently been overhauled to be more objective-centric and aligned with transformation goals.

10.2 Council agreed on the need for more frequent updates, deeper council engagement with the risk register, and ensuring that Council concerns are reflected and escalated appropriately.

11 STFC Public Engagement and the Wonder Initiative

11.1 An overview of STFC's public engagement activities was provided including the Wonder Initiative's efforts to reach underserved communities. Key points included:

11.1.1 There were two public engagement teams at STFC with one managing grants for researchers and educationalists, and another delivering engagement across STFC’s five National Laboratory sites.

11.1.2 The Wonder Initiative had been launched in 2018 and targeted engagement with the 40% most socioeconomically deprived areas, particularly children and young people. The initiative was now embedded in all public engagement activities. Recent strategies aimed to widen geographic reach and address clumping around labs and universities.

11.1.3 In the 2024 report, 900 events had been run (10% online), involving 1,500 staff and reaching over 130,000 participants, with 34% from Wonder target groups. Feedback was positive with 85% feeling inspired by STFC and 78% indicating they would seek out further opportunities to engage with STEM

11.1.4 Staff involvement was encouraged, especially from early careers staff, who acted as role models.

11.1.5 Challenges include increasing online reach, engaging underrepresented groups (such as post-GCSE students), and expanding into areas with little existing infrastructure.

11.2 Council members advised using the power on on-line and social media channels to extend STFC's reach and impact. Implementing solutions to improve teacher CPD engagement in public engagement activities was also encouraged.

12 Any other business

12.1 There was an extraordinary Council meeting on 9 June.