

MINUTES OF STFC COUNCIL - 21st JANUARY 2025

HELD AT THE COSENER'S HOUSE ABINGDON

Attendees:

Council	Michele Dougherty (Chair)	Invited: Items 2	Chris Wrench, Finance Director
	Andy Schofield (SIM & Co-Chair)		
	Jon Butterworth	Item 5	Joanne Brown, Sr HR Business Partner, Amarjit Bassan, EDI manager and Maggie Wilson, Associate Director Skills
	Lucy Edge		
	JT Janssen		
	Jana Kolar	Item 6	Valerie Farr, AI Theme lead, Dave Newbold, Exec Director National Labs: Science & Technology and Justin O'Byrne, Deputy Director Digital Research
	Patricia Hodgson		
	Angeli Moeller		
	Hiranya Peiris		
	Hitesh Thakrar		
Secretariat	Pam Thomas	Item 7	Dave Newbold & Sinead Farrington, Director of Particle Physics
	Carsten Welsch		
Council Observers	Maya Riddle & Janice Masone	Item 8	Philip King, ISIS
	Paul Monks, DESNZ CSA	Item 9	Grahame Blair, Exec Director PD & Liz Fellman, Exec Director SPC
	Keith Grainge, Chair of Science Board (PPAN)		
	Jacqui Cole, Chair of Science Board (F&L)		
Apologies			

1. Welcome

- 1.1. Andy Schofield (AJS) welcomed everyone to the fortieth meeting of STFC Council, which was held at Rutherford Appleton Laboratory. Council members extended a warm welcome to Michele Dougherty (MKD) to her first meeting as STFC's Executive Chair.
- 1.2. No apologies were noted for this meeting.
- 1.3. AJS reminded Council members that they are required to keep the Secretary informed of any changes to their personal register of interests as they arise.
- 1.4. Council members observed that most of them would have a conflict relating to Particle Physics grants, however as Council members they would always represent STFC's best interests.

- 1.5. Jacqui Cole reported a potential conflict with the AI Strategy discussion because she worked for the Henry Royce Institute.

2. Planning for Spending Review Phase 2 (SR2) and beyond

- 2.1. Chris Wrench (CW) joined the meeting to seek Council's input on STFC's planning for Spending Review Phase 2 (SR2) to fit STFC's core science into its expected budget for 2025/26. Council gave its full support to the proposed approach.
- 2.2. Council held the strong view that UKRI and the other Research Councils need to understand the disproportionate impact on STFC of UKRI's approach to the SR2 submission. STFC should seek to continue to work closely with other Research Councils, particularly EPSRC.
- 2.3. Council advised that STFC should consider being more involved in the group support functions provided by STFC and further advised that STFC should articulate in its reply that there are plans to conduct a thorough review of how STFC delivers its science and supporting functions

3. Minutes from the meeting held on 26th November 2024

- 3.1. Subject to some minor amendments which have now been actioned, Council approved the minutes as an accurate record of the meetings held on 26th November 2024.
- 3.2. The actions from previous meetings were reviewed and were either complete or in progress.

4. Executive Chair Update

- 4.1. Andy Schofield (AJS) invited Michele Dougherty (MKD) to provide an update.
- 4.2. Michele Dougherty (MKD) said that having started as STFC's Executive Chair only three weeks before this meeting, she had primarily been focused on understanding the immediate challenges facing STFC. She wanted to share information with Council in a transparent way and seek advice and support as STFC navigates this challenging landscape.
- 4.3. In summary, the key challenges are:
 - STFC's financial position, relationships with UKRI and other Research Councils,
 - changes to STFC's senior leadership team,
 - Spending Review outcomes and
 - her forthcoming meeting with the science minister.
- 4.4. Getting to grips with these challenges has unfortunately led to some disruption of her original plans to meet staff and visit the departments which she hopes to do as soon as she can.
- 4.5. With a new Executive Director, Large Scale Facilities and an interim COO, Council asked how STFC's leadership team was managing to respond to the challenges. MKD replied that she'd been impressed with the Executive team, who had rallied round to support each other and lean into decision making.
- 4.6. Council acknowledged that the changes to MKD's initial plans had caused some unrest for staff. It was also acknowledged that in reviewing and reshaping the organisation, there were some difficult decisions to be made. The Executive Board needed time to fully understand the financial position and have a clear plan to communicate to staff. Council offered its full support and requested regular updates on workforce planning at future meetings.

- 4.7. Council considered the discussion topics for the meeting with the Science Minister and was supportive of the messaging. Council recommended highlighting the importance of the Drayson partitions and including a concise executive summary which emphasised the wider impact on grants and facilities. Emphasising STFC's strong contribution to the industrial strategy, nuclear and critical technologies in any interaction or submission to senior UKRI and government officials was also highlighted.
- 4.8. Council welcomed the new format Executive chair update, having the paper in advance of the meeting gave more opportunity for reflection on the issues.

5. Developing STFC's forward EDI Action Plan

- 5.1. AJS welcomed Joanne Brown (JB), Amarjit Bassan (AB) and Maggie Wilson (MW) to the meeting to provide an update on the development of STFC's EDI action plan for 2025/26.
- 5.2. AB said that the action plan upon the 2022/23 action plan and more subsequent developments. The case for EDI as a key activity for STFC remains unchanged from the original plan, which is based on four pillars STFC's commitment to EDI is a strategic imperative that enhances the breadth and quality of its work and strengthens STFC's ability to secure the UK's position as a global leader in science, technology, and innovation.
- 5.3. The draft EDI action plan is still a work in progress, and the actions are at various levels of maturity. Council was asked to comment and provide feedback on the draft EDI action plan, highlighting any significant gaps and providing ideas on developing the external facing actions.
- 5.4. The team captured the more detailed feedback; however, points below were raised at the meeting:
- The action plan is based on embodying STFC/UKRI's values which need to become central to STFC's organisational culture. Council members suggested that values should underpin and inform the action plan.
 - Council suggested using "blind" referees for grant funding rounds, this has been trialled by other Councils. Although this is on the team's radar, resource and system processes are limitations.
 - As part of a cultural shift around diversity, Council members explored possibilities for monitoring and improving social mobility and pointed to the positive impact of early interventions such as the [Wonder Initiative phase 2: 2023 to 2028 – UKRI](#) .
 - Monitoring social mobility in funding and recruitment should be possible after the implementation of UKRI's new ERP system (SHARP). There are plans for a targeted campaign then. Jana Kolar (JK) agreed to share some data on this from Scandinavian countries.
 - Churn rate for ethnic minorities among interns and junior staff was discussed. It was noted that some excellent colleagues left because of a lack of opportunities to advance and lack of diversity in senior roles in STFC. Council members advised early intervention through coaching and mentoring to try and address this trend.
- 5.5. Overall, Council was very supportive of the direction of travel. The actions will be firmed up to ensure that they are all SMART and have owners. There will be engagement with the TU Side before seeking final sign-off by Executive Board. Once the plan is agreed it will be published internally and externally. This is expected to be by April 2025.

6. STFC Artificial Intelligence (AI) strategy

- 6.1. MKD welcomed Valerie Farr (VF), Justin O'Byrne (JOB) and Dave Newbold (DN) for this discussion of STFC's draft Artificial Intelligence (AI) strategy.
- 6.2. VF said that the strategy had been updated to take account of comment by Council made in November 2024. The strategy defined STFC's ambitions and capabilities establish STFC's approach to developing.
- 6.3. Council was asked to discuss the presentation of the strategy and whether the foreword and executive summary achieve the goal of providing a succinct, externally facing overview of the strategy. Alongside this Council was asked to note the framework provided by the strategy to inform future decision-making and any perceived gaps in the content of the strategy.
- 6.4. Key points are noted below:
 - Council gave a strong steer for the creation of an independent bullet point highlighting what STFC does to support growing new business and innovation using AI.
 - Council explored the possibility of talking to DSIT and HMG about how STFC can help deliver the aims of the Government AI Action Plan and access any separate strands of available funding. It was confirmed that STFC regularly met with DSIT to discuss the Hartree National Centre for Digital Innovation (HNCDI) and AI Research Resources (AIRR), STFC is a key partner in both.
 - Data, compute and AI are all closely linked, Council recommended that STFC emphasises its unique selling point as the home of compute and national capability for the UK. Internally, STFC should have a clear and joined up understanding of its offering.
- 6.5. Subject to some minor updates, Council approved the draft AI strategy

7. Boulby Update

- 7.1. Dave Newbold (DN) gave an updated on recent events around approval and resourcing of the Boulby Development Project and asked Council for feedback on the proposed next steps towards delivery.
- 7.2. The following points were raised in discussion:
 - Some Council members asked whether the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) Roadmap had been considered. It was confirmed this wasn't a suitable route in this instance, due to timescales and the wider international nature of this project.
 - Noting that the profile can be smoothed out to allow for gradual equipping of the facility, Council agreed that the Boulby Development Project should run for the duration of 2025/26 before being reviewed again.

8. Neutron Review 2024 Panel Report

- 8.1. Paul Monks (PM) was joined by Philip King (PK) for this discussion on the STFC commissioned updated Neutron Review Spring 2024.
- 8.2. PM said that the review assessed the impact on the UK neutron user community from the closure of Institut Laue-Langevin (ILL) in 2033 and the start of the European Spallation Source (ESS) in 2027. The report and recommendations have been endorsed by Science Board (Facilities and Laboratories) and presented to Executive Board ahead of the discussion Council.

- 8.3. Council noted that the review outlined current STFC activity that supports the recommendations but advised that the review report should comment on short term measures taken in the face of cuts and increasing productivity and make a strong case for the existence of the three complimentary neutron sources (ISIS, ILL and ESS).
- 8.4. Considering the feedback given at this meeting, Council endorsed the review recommendations and advised a further review in 2029/2030 so that recommendations and resulting actions can be updated to reflect the landscape at that time.

9. Science Board

9.1. Science Board (PPAN)

- 9.2. Keith Grainge (KG) gave the update from the most recent Science Board (PPAN) meeting which took place in which took place in November and December 2024. The content of the report was noted, and the following points were discussed at the meeting:

- Science highlights: Just a selection from some of the great science going on: [CERN reports first observation of ultra-rare particle decay – UKRI](#)
- SB PPAN was concerned about the negative impacts that will arise from the funding delays for the astronomy large and small awards, the QTFP programme and the PP CG. The board noted the current financial uncertainties but wished to highlight the damage these delays can cause in maintaining programmes, recruitment and career progression.
- Council strongly supported Science Board (PPAN)'s recommendation for open and transparent discussions with the community on these issues.
- At its March meeting, SB PPAN will agree version one of the PPAN Roadmap and begin to review priorities across PPAN, with the aim of reducing the silos that currently exist. Version one was produced in a short time frame and does not cover every aspect of the PPAN Programme. Council noted it should be viewed as a stepping stone to achieving a fuller version of the PPAN Roadmap in 2025.

9.3. Joint meeting of Science Board (PPAN) and (F&L)

- 9.4. Jacqui Cole (JC) and Keith Grainge (KG) gave an update from the joint Science Board meeting which took place in November 2024. The content of the report was noted, and the following points were discussed at the meeting:

- As raised at Council in November 2024, both Boards continue to have concerns about how the new Computing Advisory Board (CAB), which sits under STFC's Executive Board, will interact with Science Boards.
- Council understood that STFC had been required to make a rapid decision about the Computing Advisory Panel (CAP) which had led to the establishment and of the CAB. Council requested the opportunity to review the governance arrangements and scope of the CAB at a future meeting.
- Both Boards reflected that achieving Net Zero targets are critical and that sustainability needs to become a top priority for STFC. To ensure that sustainability is embedded in the 10-year roadmaps, a cross-cutting Science Board task and finish group will be set up to steer the process.
- The Science Boards endorsed the proposal for STFC to develop an accelerator strategy. The Boards reflected that it is essential that lessons are learned from previous attempts to create a strategy and that there is open community consultation as part of the process.

9.5. Council supported plans to hold a full discussion on the future of STFC's accelerator programme and advised transparency with international partners and principal investigators.

9.6. **Science Board (Facilities and Labs)**

9.7. Jacqui Cole (JC) gave the update from the most recent Science Board (F&L) meeting which took place in November 2024. The content of the report was noted, and the following points were discussed at the meeting:

- Science Board (F&L) strongly supported the recommendations and conclusions arising from the Neutron Review.
- Science Board (F&L) wish to highlight concerns over the current STFC recruitment chill and its impact on Facility users. Examples such as mothballing of instruments at ISIS, oversubscription to certain capabilities and users going elsewhere, specialised skills being lost to economy through attrition and projects are being stalled/not starting. The Board would ask that the longer-term impacts to STFC's portfolio are fully considered by Executive Board.
- Change in operating model in the facilities and labs: Whilst Science Board (F&L) understand the need and are willing to help in the process of implementation, there are concerns about the quality of the work the pooled staff will deliver. The Board feel there is likely to be a loss of key skills in highly specialised areas. The Board will keep a watching brief on these developments and requested an update on the progress of this new model at the March 2025 meeting of SB (F&L).
- Science Board (F&L) emphasised the need to progress sustainability work, particularly around the issue of carbon budgeting. Science Board (F&L) strongly advise that STFC's Executive prioritise introducing assessment of carbon cost in new and existing projects.

10. **Any other business**

- 10.1. Hitesh Thakrar said that the Industry and Business Board (IBB) is leading on organising a major "dragon's den" type innovation event at Harwell on 3rd June 2025. The Science Minister has been invited.
- 10.2. Council members requested that the backlog of Council minutes be published on the UKRI website as soon as possible.
- 10.3. On behalf of Council, MKD extended sincere thanks to Pam Thomas, Hiranya Peiris and Jon Butterworth as they step down from STFC Council. STFC has been greatly appreciative of their work.

11. **Closing remarks**

- 11.1. MKD thanked members and guests for their contribution. The next meeting will be virtual and will feature a joint session with STFC's Executive and both Science Boards. This will take place on 12th March 2025.