

Minutes of the STFC Council meeting

12 March 2025

Virtual

Part 1

Attendees

Council:

Michele Dougherty (Chair)

Andy Schofield (SIM)

Jon Butterworth

Lucy Edge

JT Janssen

Jana Kolar

Patricia Hodgson

Angeli Moeller

Hiranya Peiris

Hitesh Thakrar

Pam Thomas

Carsten Welsch

Council observers:

Paul Monks, DESNZ CSA

Keith Grainge, Chair of Science Board (PPAN)

Jacqui Cole, Chair of Science Board (F&L)

Secretariat

Other attendees:

Grahame Blair, Exec Director Programmes

Roger Eccleston, Exec Director National Labs: Large Scale Facilities

Liz Fellman, Exec Director Strategy, Planning & Comms

Dave Newbold, Exec Director National Labs: Science & Technology

STFC Strategy team

Chris Wrench, Finance Director

Stan Bentvelsen, David Charlton, Jayne Lawrence & Andrew Pontzen (Incoming Council Members)

Science Board PPAN members

Science Board F&L members

1 Welcome

- 1.1 Michele Dougherty (MKD) welcomed members of Council, Executive Board, STFC's Strategy team, Science Board (PPAN) and Science Board (Facilities and Laboratories) to the joint meeting that was held by video conference on 12th March 2025.
- 1.2 Attendees were asked to contact the secretariat to log any direct conflicts of interest for this meeting. The following conflicts were reported but it should be noted that further detail for all attendees can be found on individual Declaration of Interests returns completed by all Council and Board members as part of their membership:
 - Hiranya Peiris: Astronomy Grants
 - Jonathan Butterworth: ATLAS and Particle Physics Experiment Grants
 - Carsten Welsch: Cockcroft core grant, various projects, CDT and early-stage grants
 - David Charlton: ATLAS and Particle Physics Experiment Grants
 - Peter Hargrave: SO-UK
 - Gavin J Davies: CMS and Particle Physics Experiment Grants
 - Anne Green: Particle Physics Consolidated Grant
 - Timothy Gershon: LHCb
 - Ian Steele: Liverpool Telescope
 - Patrick Sutton: Gravitational Waves Grants/Preliminary Infrastructure Fund
 - Judith Croston: SKAO, Astronomy Grants
- 1.3 No apologies were noted for this meeting.
- 1.4 On behalf of STFC, Michele Dougherty (MKD) began by thanking everyone for making time to attend this meeting which was arranged at short notice.
- 1.5 All public sector bodies, including UKRI and STFC, are facing financial pressures and need to make efficiencies to remain within budget. STFC will need to make difficult choices to delay or stop some projects and activities. By focusing on its core mission and the areas where it can deliver the best world-class impacts, STFC can ensure its long-term future and the health of the communities it represents.
- 1.6 STFC's key advisory bodies will have an important role in this prioritisation process. In the interest of transparency, STFC will be sharing sensitive information with them. In return, MKD emphasised that all participants in this process should treat this information as completely confidential and not for further dissemination.
- 1.7 Discussion at this meeting will be at a strategic level with more detailed discussion taking place at subsequent meetings. It is anticipated that the Science Boards will report into the 14th May Council meeting.

2 Spending Review – Implications for STFC

- 2.1 MKD invited Chris Wrench (CW) to give his presentation which provided a financial overview and outlined challenges facing STFC in 2025/26, including the decisions already taken by the Executive to reduce the pressures. The presentation also covered likely constraints and impact arising from phase 2 of the Spending Review. This included consideration of UKRI's Spending Review Phase 2 submission which is framed across twelve "stack-lines."
- 2.2 The meeting noted the content of the presentation and highlighted how important it will be to demonstrate to the community that all Councils will need to take difficult decisions.
- 2.3 Questions were raised about the equity of allocations to the PPAN programme and whether these had been rebalanced by STFC's advisory bodies. It was confirmed that STFC is working closely with both Science Boards to obtain advice, but some decisions had to be made quickly to address the situation.
- 2.4 UKRI's priorities have been interpreted as protecting and enhancing talent, responsive and strategic awards and creating headroom for Critical Technologies and R&D missions whilst dialling down infrastructure investment. It was confirmed that talks with UKRI regarding the balance between facilities and programme are ongoing.
- 2.5 The meeting observed that STFC is responsible for most international subscriptions which results in having to protect/ringfence a larger percentage of its budget than other Councils. It was noted that a timeline for break/decision points for international subscriptions is being developed with UKRI and DSIT.
- 2.6 Other detailed feedback was noted and taken forward by the Strategy Team.

3 Prioritising STFC's portfolio

- 3.1 The Strategy Team gave an overview of the work that had gone into developing the options for consideration at this session. The options were developed by the Executive following a review of activities based on whether they were legal or funding commitments, aligned with STFC's strategy and government priorities, politically high profile or of a nature that only STFC could deliver them.
- 3.2 The options cover four major areas including: Facilities, PPAN Programme, Skills, Nuclear Physics and Cross Cutting.
- 3.3 The meeting received presentations from each of these areas outlining in more detail what was included in each option.

4 Next steps

- 4.1 Following a comprehensive discussion of the options and presentations from each area, detailed feedback was collected and taken forward by the Strategy Team, however a very brief summary of next steps is included below:
 - Facilities: It is critical to avoid unintended or unforeseen consequences. Next steps are to produce a convincing impact analysis, clear costings and savings and undertake further work on efficiency plans to accompany Science Board discussions.
 - PPAN: It was agreed to provide project profiles and consider decisions in the context of the 10-year plan.
 - Skills should be considered as part of the overall portfolio and not driven by immediate budgetary pressures.

- National Laboratories: It was agreed to hold a discussion of the role of the National Laboratories in the current context.
 - Process: The process should enable the Science Boards to discuss their areas and then balance and tension recommendations and understand interdependencies where there are topics that sit across both Science Boards. The Science Boards should aim to have completed their actions by the May meeting of Council.
 - The Science Boards requested clear “guardrails” alongside the information supplied to ensure that decisions were realistic and relevant. There was some concern that not all work would be completed by this date, regular communication will ensure that the most up to date information is presented.
- 4.2 Some of the areas not discussed at this meeting, such as communications, accelerators, computing and engineering will be part of longer-term reviews.
- 4.3 MKD, on behalf of STFC, thanked everyone for the frank and detailed discussion.

Part 2

Attendees

Council:

Michele Dougherty (Chair)

Andy Schofield (SIM)

Jon Butterworth

Lucy Edge

JT Janssen

Jana Kolar

Patricia Hodgson

Angeli Moeller

Hiranya Peiris

Hitesh Thakrar

Pam Thomas

Carsten Welsch

Council observers:

Paul Monks, DESNZ CSA

Keith Grainge, Chair of Science Board (PPAN)

Jacqui Cole, Chair of Science Board (F&L)

Secretariat

Other attendees:

Paul Vernon, Business & Innovation Director – item 3

Ottoline Leyser, UKRI CEO – item 5

1 Welcome

- 1.1 Michele Dougherty (MKD) and Andy Schofield (AJS) extended a warm welcome to incoming Council members Stan Bentvelsen, David Charlton, Jayne Lawrence & Andrew Pontzen who all attended this meeting as observers. They will formally begin as Council members in April 2025.
- 1.2 This was the final meeting as Council members for Pam Thomas, Jon Butterworth and Hiranya Peiris. On behalf of Council and STFC, AJS and MKD extended sincere thanks to them for their strong contributions both as Council members and in chairing or serving on a range of STFC advisory boards.

2 Minutes

- 2.1 Subject to some minor amendments which have now been actioned, Council approved the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting held on 21st January 2025.
- 2.2 The actions from previous meetings were reviewed and were either complete or in progress.
- 2.3 The following matters arose from the discussion of the minutes and actions:
 - It was confirmed that the Finance and Governance Committee will be reviewing recent updates to STFC's governance structure, including arrangements for the Computing Advisory Panel. A paper will come to the May meeting of Council.
 - Council members requested that the action to publish the outstanding minutes from previous Council meetings on the UKRI website be reinstated and completed as soon as possible.

3 Industry and Business Board (IBB)

- 3.1 MKD invited Council members Hitesh Thakrar (HT) and Angeli Moeller (AM) to present this item. They were joined by Paul Vernon (PV) who was present for this discussion. HT and AM as joint chairs of IBB gave an update on progress against IBB's objectives and key highlights.
- 3.2 The IBB provide advice on opportunities to shape STFC policy and strategy for generating IP, impact and commercialisation. The board's objectives are to identify challenges where STFC can add timely impact for the UK's critical technologies and provide advice on potential programmes and partners. Additionally, the Board will advise on wider opportunities to position STFC campus and cluster communities as national assets.
- 3.3 The following points were noted at the meeting:
 - Council was supportive of the Industrial Strategic Partnership Program training based on Amazon's "working backwards" proprietary methodology.
 - The IBB has fostered support for the innovation cluster team to raise opportunities for external innovators.
 - The Venture Capitalists event on 3rd June 2025. This will showcase STFC and Harwell's innovation ecosystem, Patrick Vallance the Minister for Science, is among the invitees.
 - Council was very interested to hear about the BID impact report and requested that Paul Vernon (PV) arrange for the report to be forwarded to members.
 - Council encouraged the IBB chairs to attend a Science Board (F&L) meeting to discuss commercialisation opportunities in the Labs as there has been a lot of interest in this area.

4 Reflections on morning session (Joint Council, Executive, Science Boards meeting)

- 4.1 MKD asked Council members for thoughts and reflections on the first part of this meeting where they had been joined by STFC's Executive and Science Boards.
- 4.2 Everyone welcomed the opportunity to meet and discuss the issues in an open and transparent manner and understood the need for confidentiality. In the longer term, it was proposed to hold a joint meeting on at least an annual basis to build mutual trust, understanding and a more direct dialogue.
- 4.3 MKD emphasised that smaller reductions across the programme are no longer possible, and real change in the form of delaying or withdrawing from activities is needed. To this end, STFC's Executive will be looking to both Science Boards for advice and input to assist in reshaping the organisation to deliver on its core mission. The chairs of both Science Boards should carefully consider what information is needed to aid decision-making,
- 4.4 STFC's programme is complex, fast moving and has wide-reaching impact. It was understood that some decisions could have political implications and will need input from DSIT and UKRI.

5 Executive Chair Update

- 5.1 AJS took over as chair of the meeting and invited Michele Dougherty (MKD) to provide an update.
- 5.2 MKD thanked Council for their encouragement to continue to engage with UKRI and DSIT which had successfully helped secure support to enable grants to be issued. However, MKD emphasised that extra support cannot be expected in future years, and it was critical that STFC reshapes itself to fit within its expected budget allocations.
- 5.3 Since Council last met in January, the case for a voluntary exit scheme has been approved by UKRI and DSIT and is now with the Cabinet Office. Council encouraged STFC to align the scheme with the prioritisation exercise and MKD confirmed this was the aim.
- 5.4 STFC is engaging with UKRI right-shaping activities focused on Institutes, Infrastructure and International Subscriptions. Council indicated it would welcome a discussion at a future meeting on the balance between national and international investments, and how value for money is assessed, particularly for international investments.
- 5.5 As previously flagged by the Finance and Governance Committee, Council should be aware of the risks associate with STFC's ageing infrastructure, which is exacerbated by constrained budgets. There is an increased probability of critical failures and inability to meet UKRI's net zero targets.

6 Update from UKRI CEO

- 6.1 AJS welcomed Ottoline Leyser (OL) to the meeting. This session was an opportunity to constructively discuss issues and ask questions of UKRI's CEO.
- 6.2 Discussion at the meeting focused on responding to questions from Council on the recent reduction to World Class Labs (WCL) funding implemented by UKRI and whether the impact of these was felt fairly across all Councils and longer-term expectations for UKRI's funding.
- 6.3 OL explained that WCL budgets can be quickly adjusted which is why UKRI targeted these areas for reductions this time round. UKRI is currently examining its fixed cost base in areas such as infrastructure and institutes as part of right shaping activities. In OL's view, all Councils are equally impacted by these decisions.

- 6.4 The research and innovation landscape is part of the wider public sector ecosystem and subject to the same pressures. Challenging times are ahead as all public sector bodies transition to a world where budgets are less likely to increase. UKRI will continue to articulate how Councils directly and indirectly make a strong contribution to government missions.
- 6.5 The session concluded with OL thanking Council members for their hard work and contributions to the success of STFC, and in turn being thanked for her leadership of UKRI.

7 Any other business

- 7.1 MKD thanked members and guests for their contribution. The next Council meeting will be held at Daresbury, will include tours on 15th to Hartree and PsiQuantum, as well as an update on the development plans for the campus and wider interactions with Liverpool and Manchester city regions.