

Minutes of the STFC Council meeting

14<sup>th</sup> May 2025

Walton Room, Cockcroft Building, Daresbury Labs

## Attendees

### Council:

Michele Dougherty (Chair)

Andy Schofield (SIM)

Stan Bentvelsen

David Charlton

Lucy Edge

Patricia Hodgson

JT Janssen

Jana Kolar

Jayne Lawrence

Andrew Pontzen

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 - Items 1-6

Roger Eccleston, Exec Director National Labs: Large Scale Facilities - Items 1-6

Liz Fellman, Exec Director Strategy, Planning & Comms - Items 1-6

Dave Newbold, Exec Director National Labs: Science & Technology - Items 1-6

Paul Vernon, Exec Director Business & Innovation - Items 1-6

Chris Wrench, Director of Finance - Items 1-6

Keith Zimmerman, COO - Items 1-6

STFC Strategy team members – Items 1-6, 10 and

STFC Infrastructure team – item 11

### Apologies

Angeli Möller

Hitesh Thakrar

## 1 Welcome and Executive Chair Update

- 1.1 Michele Dougherty (MKD) welcomed everyone to the meeting and in particular the new Council members, Stan Bentvelsen, David Charlton, Jayne Lawrence and Andrew Pontzen.
- 1.2 Apologies were received from Angeli Möller and Hitesh Thakrar. Paul Monks would be absent for part of the meeting.
- 1.3 MKD reminded Council members of the following:
  - STFC regularly shares sensitive information with Council and as a result it is essential to maintain confidentiality.
  - Council members are required to keep the Secretary informed of any changes to their personal register of interests as they arise. Any conflicts of interest should be declared at the meeting.

## 2 Spending Review & Prioritisation Update

- 2.1 MKD commented on the difficult financial situation faced by the UK and that there were pressures across the public services. Other countries were also facing similar financial challenges.
- 2.2 She had met with Patrick Vallance, Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation, to discuss STFC's challenges. He would like to be kept informed and wanted STFC to continue to work with UKRI and DSIT on how to manage any proposed measures.
- 2.3 A recap on phase two of the government's Spending Review (SR) was presented, which will decide the budgets for 2026/27 to 2029/30.
- 2.4 Modelling of the stack lines from UKRI's bid to the Treasury, in particular the reductions in infrastructure and institutes lines, implied that STFC would need to deal with significant budgetary pressures over the SR period.
- 2.5 It was noted that the government wanted R&D to be a part of the UK growth solution.

## 3 Prioritisation Update

- 3.1 STFC's Science Boards had undertaken a scientific prioritisation exercise since the last meeting and had provided their initial advice. However, that work did not go far enough as to generate the scale of savings required. The STFC Executive had developed a more extensive set of measures.
- 3.2 The guiding principles used by the Executive included taking a proportionate approach and avoiding irreversible harm to national capability or individual disciplines. The measures were grouped into three categories:
  - Category 1 - measures within STFC's control.
  - Category 2 - measures requiring further engagement with stakeholders.
  - Category 3 - measures that would have fundamental impacts to STFC's remit.
- 3.3 In this initial exercise, saving targets were based on balancing STFC's budget in a flat cash scenario. However, further measures would be required to ensure STFC's long-term financial sustainability.

## 4 Feedback from Science Board

- 4.1 Keith Grainge (KG) and Jacqui Cole (JC) gave a joint presentation providing feedback from both Science Boards on the Executive's prioritisation. This included:
- Both Science Boards were concerned about the potential effects on UK capability and the balance between national and international funding of science.
  - It was advised that an inter-facility roadmap would be valuable.
  - Science Board (PPAN) had not considered value for money or duplication of science in its scientific prioritisation exercise and would like to consider these.
  - Projects funded via the UKRI Infrastructure Fund should also be reconsidered as part of the portfolio prioritisation.
  - If there were significant reduction in the number of students, this would have a detrimental impact on the future health of the PPAN field.
  - Science Board members would like to better understand why STFC was facing this scale of financial challenge and would like assurance the measures are proportionate.
- 4.2 Chris Wrench (CW) gave a high-level summary of the reasons behind STFC's financial pressures, which included inflationary rises, pay pressures and cost increases in several major PPAN projects. He agreed to brief the Science Boards.

## 5 Discussion of scenarios

- 5.1 Council was unable to provide considered advice as there was not sufficient detail in the information presented at the meeting. Members were concerned about unintentional consequences of the proposed measures. So, more detail, and the rationales were requested.
- 5.2 It was agreed that an information pack would be provided to Council. This would include:
- The historical reasons why STFC are where they are today.
  - Information on STFC's rationale for the measures including which options were discarded and why.
  - A Communications Strategy.

## 6 Conclusions & Next Steps

- 6.1 MKD informed Council that the Executive Board would be meeting with the incoming UKRI CEO, Ian Chapman in June.
- 6.2 It was agreed that an extraordinary Council meeting would be held in early June.
- 6.3 Jan Kolar (JK) suggested that STFC consider mid and long term plans in addition to short term measures. She agreed to provide a briefing on European facility funding models.

## 7 Council reflection on morning session

- 7.1 Andy Schofield (AJS) asked MKD to convey Council's thanks to the Executive Board for their hard work during this challenging period. MKD had the full support of Council, who recognise the challenges she has faced so early into her role as Executive Chair.

- 7.2 MKD explained that part of her mandate was to improve transparency and to improve relationships between STFC and its stakeholders including those within UKRI. It was important to keep the scientific community engaged despite the difficult decisions that will need to be made.
- 7.3 AJS invited Council to reflect on the morning session. Points of discussion included:
- Council would like a number of scenarios to be developed with different strategic approaches so that these could be compared.
  - In order to prioritise, STFC will need to develop a strategic vision for STFC's future.
- 7.4 The Science Board Chairs discussed the challenge they faced with limited time and with sufficient independence.
- 7.5 MKD conveyed her thanks to the Science Boards for their effort to meet and undertake prioritisation exercises at short notice.

## **8 Minutes and Actions from the meeting held on 12th March 2025**

- 8.1 Subject to some minor amendments which have now been actioned, Council approved the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting held on 12th March 2025.
- 8.2 The actions from previous meetings were reviewed and were either complete or in progress.

## **9 Exec Chair Update**

- 9.1 MKD provided some highlights, which included:
- Since the last Council meeting the case for a voluntary exit scheme at STFC had been approved by the Cabinet Office.
  - Keith Zimmerman, STFC's new Chief Operating Officer was a positive addition to her Executive Team.
  - Professional leadership and communications training was taking place for the Executive Board in June.
  - Council recruitment was due to go live later in the week. STFC was seeking to replace Patricia Hodgson, who was coming to the end of her term next year.
  - There had been a positive Boulby Development Programme Board meeting including an update on the international XLZD project. A number of government Chief Scientific Advisors were visiting Boulby Underground Lab the following week.
- 9.2 Council discussed possibilities around protecting innovative programmes in AI and quantum technologies. It was agreed that STFC should continue to work collaboratively with other Research Councils in order to help the government achieve against the five technologies it had outlined as a priority.

## **10 Draft Strategic Delivery Plan**

- 10.1 The draft strategic delivery plan which will cover 2025/26 and 2026/27. Council's feedback was requested on the key content of the draft.
- 10.2 Council noted that the format for the report was quite restrictive and suggested that the narrative and additional case studies could be used to highlight STFC's delivery of world class science and government missions.

## 11 Infrastructure Update

- 11.1 The STFC Infrastructure Team, joined the meeting and provided an update on the UKRI Infrastructure Fund.
- 11.2 The funding for wave 4 of the UKRI infrastructure fund was dependent on the outcome of the spending review. UKRI was currently planning on a basis of submission of bids by 1st August 2025.
- 11.3 STFC was considering submitting the UK Extremely Large Telescope (UKELT) project, which covered the delivery of two second-generation instruments for the International ELT project based in Chile. This was the next phase of a preliminary activity scheduled to end in March 2026.
- 11.4 Council was invited to comment on the proposal, noting that the final decision rested with STFC Executive Board.
- 11.5 It was noted that it was one of the highest-ranking projects in the recent strategic scientific prioritisation activity undertaken by Science Board PPAN.
- 11.6 Council members asked several questions of clarification around risk, contingency and possible costs to STFC. Council also wanted to understand the scientific risks if the UK did not lead in this area.

## 12 Finance and governance update

- 12.1 AJS gave an update on the Finance and Governance meeting held in March, which included:
  - Oracle Fusion, UKRI's new Enterprise Resource Planning system, was due to go live in June.
  - The F&G committee had reviewed the STFC's cyber risk. The recent pilot with Darktrace had proven a useful tool in identifying threats to the network.
  - STFC would be conducting a review of the effectiveness of the STFC Council and as part of this, members will receive a questionnaire to complete in the autumn.
  - F&G committee encouraged STFC to maintain opportunities despite the need to make savings.
- 12.2 As part of the Council's performance review, Paul Monks suggested pairing Council members with Executive Board members to deepen the Council members' knowledge of areas outside of their own expertise.

## 13 Science Board (PPAN) - March meeting

- 13.1 Keith Grainge (KG) gave an update from the most recent Science Board PPAN meeting which took place in March 2025.
  - Science highlights included the Breakthrough Prize in Fundamental Physics awarded to thousands of researchers from more than 70 countries representing four experimental collaborations at CERN's Large Hadron Collider (LHC) – ATLAS, CMS, ALICE, LHCb.
  - The impact of savings on the recent Consolidated Grants.
  - As part of their recent prioritisation exercise, SB PPAN had reviewed the projects that STFC had paused or withdrawn funding from. SB PPAN agreed that these projects should not be reinstated at the expense of impacting other projects in the portfolio.

- SB PPAN recommended deferring publication of the 10-year PPAN roadmap once the impact of the government's Spending Review phase two were clearer. The Executive Summary could be published as an interim report.

## **14 Science Board (F&L) - March meeting**

14.1 Jacqui Cole (JC) gave an update from the most recent Science Board F&L meeting which took place in March 2025.

- Science Board F&L welcomed five new members: Ashley King, Annela Seddon, Neil Bourne, Graeme Burt, Peter Hargraves.
- SB F&L received presentations on MOONS and RAL Space and had had tours of NQCC and RAL Space.
- There had been an update on the Computer Advisory Panel (CAP) governance. SB F&L advocated early engagement between CAP and both Science Boards, and careful monitoring of the evolution of CAP as a functional advisory body.
- SB F&L noted the planned Accelerator Review and the intention to introduce international representation to counteract any conflicts of interest on the panel.

## **15 Any other business**

15.1 UKRI Human Resources will write to Council members for their demographic data as part of the UKRI EDI statistics on Council membership.

15.2 MKD thanked members for their contribution and said that there will be an extraordinary meeting arranged to discuss some of the actions raised earlier in the day.