

News from STFC Council

On the 28th and 29th January 2008 STFC Council held a strategy meeting.

Prior to the meeting Council met with the Trade Unions to discuss their concerns about the impact of the Council's plans on staff in the STFC.

At the meeting Council received and discussed progress reports on: the programmatic review and the prioritisation exercise which had just been engaged in by the Science Board and its peer-review committees; the implementation of its restructuring programme; and campus developments. The Council also considered the scale of reaction following the publication of its Delivery Plan.

The Council thanked the Science Board and its committees, the Particle Physics, Astronomy and Nuclear Physics Science Committee [PPAN] and the Physical and Life Sciences Committee (PALS) for the very thorough and conscientious way they had prioritised each element of the Council's science programme. It was satisfied that the processes these peer-review bodies followed were rigorous and consistent with best practice in the Research Councils, and that the information available to them was sufficient to make recommendations. Council also acknowledged the pressures under which the members of its advisory structure had of necessity to work and the very difficult choices they had to make.

Council recognised the importance of these processes being transparent, and a description of the processes has been published:

<http://www.scitech.ac.uk/resources/pdf/SBNews280108.pdf>

Over the next three weeks the executive will evaluate the science programme that will be affordable in light of the Science Board's recommendations. Council will decide on its scientific priorities for the CSR07 period at its meeting on 27 February and these will be announced at the beginning of March. This will be followed by a period of consultation with the community concerning the implementation of the plan.

As Council has already made clear some existing programme items will not be funded. It discussed and reaffirmed its previous decisions to stop funding the International Linear Collider [ILC] and to cease remaining support for ground-based Solar-Terrestrial Physics [STP] facilities. It confirmed its intention to negotiate a reduction in its investment in Gemini.

Council reviewed and confirmed its position on research grants. The delivery plan will hold exploitation research grants to Universities in 2008 at broadly the same level as 2007. Council was concerned that the impact of the scaling back in new grant commitments over the CSR07 period should be set in the context of the increasing trend of grant funding in the recent past. It agreed that it would be helpful to issue an explanatory note. This note is attached at Annex A.

Council confirmed its commitment to the development of the Daresbury and Harwell Science and Innovation Campuses. It is expected that major inward investment in both campuses will be announced shortly and the Council has submitted plans for further capital development on both sites from the Large Facilities Capital Fund. At Harwell, the Joint Venture Company is expected to be set up in the next few months. At Daresbury the Council is committed to the development of more partnership ventures such as the Cockcroft Institute. Further decisions on the future of the Daresbury campus will be informed by the findings of the McKillop review.

Council discussed the scale of reaction to its Delivery Plan. The Council acknowledged the impact its decisions would have, and that there was excellent science that it would not be able to accommodate in its plan. It was entirely understandable, indeed right, that there should be debate about these decisions and there would be differences of view. However, the Council was concerned that the focus of the debate risked masking the scale of continuing investment in the science programme.

Council agreed to proceed with developing its plan to achieve an optimal programme within its budget, taking account of the results of peer-review described above. The Council has already taken a limited number of decisions to withdraw from lower priority programmes and has announced a programme of

voluntary redundancies within its own laboratories. With the exception of the closure of the Synchrotron Radiation Source [SRS], on which the experimental programme will end as planned in September 2008, the Council does not envisage that further compulsory redundancies, if needed, will be implemented before the summer.

Council will take stock over the summer and will use the opportunity to respond to any recommendations from the McKillop and Wakeham reviews whose reports are expected by then.

Annex A

STFC Delivery Plan and University Particle Physics, Nuclear Physics and Astronomy posts.

Research grants make up the bulk of the funding that STFC gives to universities and with such a large amount it is inevitable that, in order to fit within available resources, the grants budget would come under pressure.

Exploitation grant awards are made for a period of 1-5 years, usually with a review point approximately 3 years into the award to assess the health of the work programme.

Awards are planned on three year cycles but the timetable is different for Astronomy, Particle Physics and Nuclear Physics.

1. Impact of 25% Reduction in New Commitment on Research Grants

Astronomy

Astronomy exploitation grants (responsive mode) are reviewed every three years, with approximately one third coming up for reconsideration each year.

The numbers of Post Doctoral Research Assistants (PDRA's) supported by STFC through astronomy grants by year, taking into account the awards that will shortly be announced for next year, are:

- 2006/2007: 278
- 2007/2008: 329
- 2008/2009: 323 [of which 82 will be awarded in 2008/09]

STFC's published delivery plan envisages that the number of PDRA's supported in 2011 will be 11% below the 2005 level, but following the introduction of Full Economic Costing the overall funding for exploitation grants in astronomy will have increased by £14M over 2005. Comparing 2008/09 to 2005/06 there is an overall increase in funding for astronomy grants of 67% [£15.2M].

Particle Physics

Particle Physics rolling grant awards are made every three years and while these represent the majority of the awards there are theory and responsive mode grants awarded in the intervening years. The next rolling grants review is in

2009, and decisions will take effect in October 2009, i.e. mid-way through the second year of the revised STFC Delivery Plan. In the short-term therefore awards are largely protected from the impact of scaling back new commitment because of the decision making cycle. The Wakeham Review will report by summer 2008 and its recommendations can therefore be accommodated within this timetable.

Overall, the funding going into Particle Physics grants will be 43% [£7.1M] higher in 2008/09 than in 2005/06 due to the introduction of Full Economic Costing.

In the case of low priority projects identified in the programmatic review and the Delivery Plan STFC will withdraw funding.

Nuclear Physics

Responsibility for Nuclear Physics grants was transferred from EPSRC to STFC in 2007. In the summer of 2007 STFC awarded bridging funding pending a grant round which is now in progress. Because of the funding cycle the number of PDRA's in Nuclear Physics will be reduced by circa 22%, circa 14 posts, in the CSR period. Overall, the funding for nuclear physics, including Full Economic Costing, will be 78% [£3.7M] higher in 2008/09 than in 2005/06.

2. Wakeham Review

A health of disciplines review of physics, chaired by Professor Bill Wakeham, vice-chancellor of the University of Southampton. The review is expected to report in the summer 2008.

For further information on the Wakeham Review see:

<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/review/physics/default.htm>

3. McKillop Review

Led by Sir Tom McKillop, who is currently chairing the Manchester Independent Economic Review, the government initiated McKillop review will assess the current and potential contribution of the Daresbury Science and Innovation Campus to science and innovation in the UK economy and to the Northwest in particular. It will have a particular reference to the scale and scope needed to achieve national and international significance. The review is due in the summer 2008.