

Researchers and politicians demand changes at top of facilities council

MPs and astronomers are calling for management changes at the Science and Technology Facilities Council, claiming that the council has lost the confidence of the researchers in its charge.

The council of the Royal Astronomical Society wrote to Keith Mason, chief executive of the STFC, on 15 February, demanding action to diffuse what it describes as a crisis in astronomy funding (*see views pages 16,18*). A likely reduction of 25 per cent in grant funding has “filled the community with deep pessimism and anger,” the letter says. It stops short of demanding resignations but says the STFC has “failed miserably to communicate with the community” and there is a “lack of confidence” in it as a result.

The RAS adds that the council was not legally required to gag its staff while they came up with the plan, and describes its failure to establish an advisory body to represent the physics and astronomy community in its decision-making process as a “catastrophic error”.

Peter Soulsby, Labour MP for Leicester South, has tabled an early day motion in the House of Commons asking that the STFC act to improve its communication with the wider public—and that unspecified senior staff members at the council should be asked to leave.

Soulsby’s constituency is home to the University of

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Leicester’s physics department, which fears funding losses under the council’s spending plan. He says he believes there is considerable support in the Commons for his point of view. “I don’t think its for me to say who should go or who should replace them but I do know that the people who are heading the STFC will find it very difficult to recover from this crisis of confidence,” he told *Research Fortnight*. “What has been so appalling has been the inability of those involved to get straight answers to reasonable questions about what has led to this situation, and the criteria used to reach what appear to be arbitrary decisions.”

Soulsby does not believe the government knew that the STFC’s comprehensive spending review settlement would leave it with no choice but to make sharp cuts. “I do not believe that the government can be held responsible. I think questions should be directed at the STFC.”

The House of Commons Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee was due to meet on 20 February to hear evidence from Ian Pearson, the minister for science and innovation, and Keith O’Nions, the director general of science and innovation, on this year’s STFC budget.

news in brief

Data archive for social scientists

The UK Data Archive is launching a service to more easily link funding to the ultimate output of research projects, such as academic publications. It will initially be available to Economic and Social Research Council award holders only, with the intention of extending the system to other social science researchers in the future.

Minister calls for focus on R&D

Nigel Dodds, the Northern Ireland minister for the economy, has called for an increased focus on R&D as the key to economic prosperity. Dodds spoke at the launch of a mapping study that identified 18 R&D centres of excellence in the north with the potential to work with centres across the border. The study by InterTradeIreland, a business development organisation, recommends measures such as establishing an all-island funding mechanism.

Hi-tech companies release low carbon plan

Intellect, the trade association for the UK technology industry, has published a report called *High Tech: Low carbon* exploring the role of technology in tackling climate change. Intellect’s environment leadership group, which includes Microsoft, Intel, HP, Sharp, Fujitsu and Deloitte, has agreed to implement the recommendations.

Leeds launches cardiovascular centre

The University of Leeds has established the Multidisciplinary Cardiovascular Research Centre to support new approaches to the treatment of cardiovascular disease. Staff from the faculties of medicine and health and biological sciences will study the role of the cardiovascular system in conditions such as diabetes and obesity. The centre will also provide a base for interdisciplinary research.

Council seeks peer review affiliates

The Natural Environment Research Council is inviting nominations for affiliate membership of its peer review college, to represent research users during peer review of responsive mode and fellowship grant applications, particularly in terms of the knowledge transfer activities presented in each. Affiliate members are asked to review up to eight full grant proposals and attend up to three panel meetings a year. Nominations close on 14 March.

RCUK to launch Darwin site

Research Councils UK is planning a website to provide resources on the work of Charles Darwin. In the build up to the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, RCUK plans to open the discussion on his importance in the present day through a series of events and podcasts.