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Research Fortnight News

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MPs criticise Mason and STFC over funding shortfall

by Laura Hood lhnews@ResearchResearch.com

The government sowed the seeds of a funding crisis at the Science and Technology Facilities Council when it failed to give the new body enough money or time to cope with the responsibilities it inherited from its predecessor organisations, a report from MPs has concluded.

But the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee believes that the STFC's senior management made the situation worse by misjudging priorities and failing to consult the community on many of their decisions.

The science budget allocations report, published on 30 April following a three-month inquiry into the budget awarded to the research councils for the next three years, concludes that the combined budgets of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council and the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils were not enough to meet the costs of their merger into the STFC while maintaining a full programme of grants and facilities. It also says that the STFC had not been in existence long enough to adequately prepare for the enormous task with which it was burdened during the comprehensive spending review.

But Keith Mason, the STFC chief executive, and his management team come in for the strongest criticism over their persistent failure to warn scientists about the funding decisions being taken and their attempts to "play down" the serious consequences of cutting rolling grants that had already been promised to researchers.

The committee was particularly scathing about a private review of STFC-funded projects that was commissioned by Mason when he first took over the research council. The advice he was given during this period is still not known to anyone else. The committee says that it is "at a loss to understand how professor Mason could think that secretive reviews would have anything but a divisive effect on the community and undermine confidence in any of his future decisions".

These comments have been taken by some scientists as a call for Mason's position to be reviewed, although Phil Willis, the Liberal Democrat chairman of the committee, denies that this is the case. "I don't think it is our job to call for someone to resign or to be sacked, but it is our job to highlight that this is an organisation that has lost the faith of one very large part of its community," he told Research Fortnight.

The committee has now advised the STFC to hold back on many of the proposed cuts being made until Bill Wakeham's review of physics funding in the UK has been concluded in September, despite being told by Mason that Wakeham's conclusions will have no bearing on the direction taken during this spending review period.

It also strongly suggests that the council should reconsider the fate of ground-based solar terrestrial physics—a particular casualty of funding cuts—and that it should discuss with the Natural Environment Research Council how to support the field in the

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future.

Another concern for the committee was the future of the Daresbury science and innovation campus in Cheshire. During the inquiry, the MPs met with scientists from the site who expressed concern about the government's commitment to their work. They said they felt the government was gradually turning their workplace into a business park. The committee is seeking proof from the government that it intends to continue supporting major science projects there in the future.

Willis says that MPs have been further disappointed by the STFC's response so far. The council released a statement when the report was published saying that several of the committee's recommendations were already being acted on, and that other improvements would follow.

"Frankly I was disappointed with Keith Mason's response to our report. He basically dismissed many of the accusations and said 'we are dealing with these issues'," said Willis. "That's not a good enough response. What is now needed is a proper action plan to say how these issues are being addressed and how he and the council intend to win back the confidence of the community, because if he can't do that then his position at that point becomes untenable."

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