

**Attendees:****UKRI/STFC:**

- Professor Sir Ian Chapman (IC)
- Professor Michele Dougherty (MD)
- Professor Grahame Blair (GB)
- 3 additional members of UKRI/STFC staff, names given before start of note-taking.

**IOP:**

- Elizabeth Chamberlain (EC)

**Fellows Open Letter:**

- Dr Kirsty Duffy (KD)
- Dr Patrick Dunne (PD)
- Dr Conor Fitzpatrick (CF)
- Dr Matthew Williams (MW)
- Dr Laura Wolz (LW)

**ECR Open Letter:**

- Dr Lucien Heurtier (LH)
- Dr Simon Williams (SW)

**ECFA ECR Letter:**

- Dr Harriet Watson (HW)
- Dr Aidan Wiederhold (AW)
- Dr Estifa'a Zaid (EZ)

Below are summarised minutes of the meeting, organised by discussion topic. A full transcript of the meeting is available on request.

**Planned cuts to PPAN budget**

- KD expressed that upcoming cuts to the PPAN budget are very concerning because they directly translate to loss of postdoc jobs and many here are affected. Lord Vallance recognises that PPAN is being tensioned against facilities. Is this a deliberate choice to cut PPAN science?
- IC responded no, each council gets a flat budget, uplifts have been in collective cross-council programmes. More perturbative to STFC due to forecast cost pressure
- KD: cost pressure sounds like our budget would stay flat but we can't do as much. That's not what we're talking about - we're talking about a cut to the PPAN budget
- MD responded that STFC has a particular problem due to overspending in the past 4 years or so. She said the PPAN grant budget was increased in 24/25 and that can no longer be afforded, and offered to get numbers for that. Stated that the community proformas (regarding impact of 20/40/60% cuts to projects) would be used in a prioritisation process by Science Board, and the results taken to UKRI to "see what the impact of following through" with the 30% cut would be. Then the decision would be made
- KD requested a formal letter to the community stating that the reduction to 70% is not set in stone, if that is the case.

- On further discussion, MD clarified that once the information had been gathered she would discuss with Ian and Patrick Vallance about what that means, potentially also at UKRI board level. However, the current trajectory is that the budget needs to reduce to 70% of the 24/25 budget unless something changes.
- IC said that this is forecasted cost pressure, not materialised. “UKRI is trying to see the implication of different things we could temper, delay, defer, stop, pause across the STFC portfolio. Some things are not in our gift...looking at everything else”...“No decisions taken, meant in the spirit of please provide input”.
- Later in the discussion, MD said that the plan is to ask Science Board to put together scenarios at 10/20/30% cut levels to make clear what the impacts are and share that with UKRI. KD asked for clarification, saying that we have already had a 15% cut to grant lines, 25% cut to PPAN if IF is included, so we are beyond 10% already. MD clarified that this would be a 10% cut to the PPAN grants, meaning an increase in funding from the current situation.

**Action item: We requested that STFC issue a formal letter to the community clarifying whether a reduction to 70% is still the plan.**

### **Cost Pressures**

- KD asked MD and IC to be specific about the cost pressures and where they are coming from
- MD gave ATLAS as an example, where the original proposal was £32M and said that because of delays costs have increased to £55M. KD pointed out that it's not just covid, delays, and inflation, but also that the work has expanded to a broader scope. The new project includes installation and commissioning, which was always anticipated to be an additional grant beyond the £32M, so this is not an apples-to-apples comparison.
- KD said that we have heard from IC that cost pressures are related to energy prices and running of facilities, and asked for more information. IC responded that over the last 5 years STFC has started 9 new things (listing ATLAS, DUNE, Boulby expansion, Diamond 2, ISIS, and Hartree) and stopped nothing. That is the lion's share of the cost pressure. Electricity costs have gone up, but that has been managed by running ISIS at 80%.
- KD (and later EZ) asked what the ratio is of cost pressures coming from PPAN and non-PPAN, stating that the communities we represent do not think it's in line with a 30% cut to PPAN, and rather that it seems PPAN is being cut to subsidise facilities. MD said that out of the £160m needed to be saved, they are looking to find £120M savings “within STFC” [which we interpret to mean not PPAN], saying “the majority of the cut is within STFC, which is where the vast majority of the increase in costs comes”. She said that this will have real implications on staff numbers and mean losing staff. KD pointed out that cutting PPAN also means losing jobs.
- IC stated that no decision had been made yet on the split - it could be 160/0 or 80/80. He reiterated that this is a forecast overspend, not a current deficit, and said that taking action sooner will reduce pain later, but taking some of it into UKRI will hit other councils.
- Later in the meeting, IC expressed that he understood the concerns raised, but pointed out that the overall R&I budget is increasing, and this is an anomalous issue for STFC. KD responded that this is why people perceive this as a deliberate choice

to cut PPAN. While IC asked which of the projects started were most important, KD replied that the community had been in the middle of a strategic planning process that would enable prioritisation within a budget, which had been paused due to the announced cuts.

**Action item: One week in advance of this meeting, we requested a detailed breakdown of STFC cost pressures, and the information was not provided. Neither was it provided during the discussion in the meeting. The community needs transparency on this issue, so we once again request that UKRI and STFC provide this detailed information.**

### Loss of postdocs

- SW stated that a real concern among ECRs is that current funding framework is already translating to ECR attrition, and we could potentially lose a generation of researchers from the UK, “killing the tree from the roots”
- MD responded that she grasps we will lose some postdocs, but can't see a scenario where she would sign off on CGs that only cover academic staff time, so we won't lose all.
- SW pointed out that in particle theory there is an internationally-agreed transition window that ends on 31st Jan. Due to delays in the PP theory CG, this has been missed and the UK will have essentially no theory postdocs starting this October. He expressed concern this could be the canary in the coal mine for other areas. MD asked if other areas were sensitive to delays in this way.
- GB stated that the delay was due to smaller than expected available grant funding, such that recommendations the previous grants panel were no longer applicable, and they wanted to go back to the grants panel to make sure the landscape was fully looked at.
- SW stated that O(20-25) theory postdocs are usually advertised in the UK each year, and this year he only knows of 3 at IPPP. GB said this aligns with STFC understanding.
- Later in the discussion, IC said that this was “utterly inadvertent” and due to outside factors such as the timing of the spending review decision.
- Similarly, LW brought up the astro small grants where the rate of postdoc time awarded was 19% this year, down from 31% the previous year. GB stated that the cut was more like 15%, and astro grants were delayed by 6 months in order to “preserve numbers” of postdocs. This was discussed with science board who recommended this as the “least worst” option. The hope is to rebuild postdoc numbers when current costs subside.
- It was highlighted that people in the room were at risk of losing their jobs. Fellows also expressed concerns about attracting people to work with them if the UK is perceived to be an unstable research environment.
- SW asked if the effect on the output of the community from losing so many ECRs had been studied. IC said no, but it is worth doing.
- IC offered “some crumbs of comfort”, saying he had a previous job in a national lab where they had to cut back very hard: 30% cut to budget, 3 years of no PhD students or postdocs, compulsory redundancies. The community is now in rude health, budget grows year on year. “These things are not irrecoverable”

- CF/KD said that several physics departments are at risk of closure, with national average 45% department overheads coming from PPAN. "Cuts at this level could result in a death spiral"

**Action item: UKRI/STFC should conduct a study of the short, medium, and long-term impact of losing so many ECRs across all PPAN fields.**

### **National capabilities**

- MW pointed out that reducing curiosity-led research, particularly through CGs, will reduce national capability to respond to shifting government priorities of things contained in other buckets. Suggested that UKRI should consult with a broader selection of stakeholders including DESNZ and MOD, mentioning that nuclear physicists do a lot of work with AWE.
- IC: Really good suggestions. I don't think we've spoken to MOD or DESNZ about this particular issue.
- Later in the discussion, MW asked what financial sustainability looks like, saying "it sounds like fewer physicists but I'm not sure that's what people or the government want". MD cautioned that we should be careful when saying "there will be fewer physicists" because there would be more money elsewhere.

**Action item: UKRI/STFC, or DSIT, should share their impact assessment with MOD and DESNZ (and other relevant departments) and consult on how the funding cuts may impact them.**

### **Infrastructure fund**

- IC: UKRI perspective was that IF funding was subject to business case so had not been awarded, therefore not viewed as a cut. Based on conversations with DOE around the EIC, he believes other governments will not be surprised by this and if we want to come back we can.
- CF noted the business cases had not been read by UKRI, and that the IF award had encouraged other countries to commit to fund the LHCb upgrade, but now we've gone back on it causing reputational damage as reported in the press
- MD on the decision process: MD chairs the committee that was asked to make these decisions, but felt she had to recuse herself due to conflict of interest. The committee was asked to consider 9/10 projects and told they could only afford half of them. She said that the IF funding is always subject to the spending review, and that all councils with projects in this round had been asked to describe briefly what the impact would be if the projects were postponed or cancelled. GB pulled together information and made clear it would impact staff and ECRs and potentially international reputation. This information was given (by all councils) to the infrastructure committee for use in the prioritisation.
- IC confirmed the infrastructure fund will continue and invited LHCb to re-bid, but the opportunity will not open very soon. CF responded that LHCb (and others) desperately needs this to secure planning on tight timescale.

### **Should PPAN move to another council?**

- LH asked where the increase in responsive research budget is going, given IC's statement that every council has a flat budget. IC said that the applicant led portion of

the budget is increasing the same in all councils, but in STFC there is “blurring between responsive and strategic” funding.

- LH and KD asked about the tension between PPAN and facilities, given that the facilities largely do not serve PPAN science. They noted that in this context a reduced PPAN budget seems to come from an increased facilities budget.
- IC: “When I came in to UKRI I didn’t understand why PPAN is in STFC and not EPSRC. Should we move you to EPSRC and tension against other physics? Live or die against other fields”
- ECRs expressed concerns about moving to EPSRC: PD said that PPAN is different from other physics because it needs longer-term specific types of multi-institute awards. In a system where we are tensioned against something else, it will be important to keep that. IC said that EPSRC does 5-7 year grants and that long-term projects can be run by renewing grants, giving an example of a facility he ran for 25 years on renewing EPSRC grants.
- MD said that as part of the upcoming prioritisation she will reopen the conversation about where PPAN should sit, saying “it’s clear this isn’t working and we need to look at this”. ECRs welcomed this discussion and expressed that there were many ways to restructure the councils to better protect PPAN, which will require some consideration, but emphasised the necessity of the community being part of these conversations.

**Action item: STFC to define a clear path for ECRs and other community members to give input on the question of where PPAN research should sit**

### **Bucket 2: Quantum/AI**

- SW noted that PPAN has a large overlap with these fields, and asked if there was an idea to look at what PPAN does and identify what parts are already quantum/AI.
- MD, IC suggested that the community can apply for bucket 2 funding, but acknowledged the mechanism to do so is not yet accessible.
- ECRs expressed concerns regarding rumours that the money is already allocated, but IC questioned where this came from, saying the business case was not yet approved so no decisions could have been made.
- EZ requested stronger support from STFC for PPAN researchers to bid for these grants. LH expressed uncertainty around how much of bucket 2 will be accessible to PPAN. IC said it will be open to everybody, but will be awarded to the highest-impact applications.

**Action item: UKRI to confirm concrete pathways for people to apply for bucket 2 funding, and STFC to provide support to PPAN researchers in doing so.**

### **Suggestions to UKRI and STFC**

- In response to IC asking what we would do if we were MD, EZ presented a number of suggestions:
  - Learning from what has happened to theory and making sure it doesn’t happen again - continuity mechanisms to make sure staffing levels can be conserved.
  - An impact assessment looking at the impact of cuts on PPAN and the future of physics in the UK, with ECRs as a cornerstone. EZ stated that this needs

to be transparent to community as a whole, to give confidence that UKRI and STFC have thought all these things through, and that the impact assessment should consider the potential impact of separating PPAN from facilities, and the mechanism by which this is done.

- MW noted we've been here before, and suggested looking at how to protect against sharp shocks. IC agreed that contingency is important, and UKRI currently doesn't have any. He plans to build some in in years 3-4 of the SR but to do so earlier would exacerbate cost pressures.
- LH suggested further advocacy to the government, and KD offered community support to engage with decision-makers, following models of similar grassroots community engagement between HEP scientists and decision-makers in the US. IC said "we'll take you up on that".
- KD noted that partitions that used to be present in STFC budget have been eroded, as reported in Science Council minutes, and suggested reinstating them. There are different ways to do that (moving to EPSRC, re-establishing PPAN in its own research council etc) but we need stronger, formalised partitions that won't go away.

*In the select committee meeting the following day Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP also suggested that pressure could be applied upwards, for example between DSIT and Treasury, to release the required funds. Referred to it as a "rounding error" for the treasury.*

### **Future communications**

- At many points in the meeting, a desire was expressed for better communication between UKRI/STFC and the PPAN community, and stronger involvement of the community (and particularly ECRs) in decisions. In particular:
  - PD expressed that in the absence of good communication, cuts to PPAN and the impacts of delays feel like a strategic choice, and that a statement from IC and MD that this is not the case would go a long way.
  - As highlighted previously, ECRs requested a formal letter to the community stating that the reduction to 70% is not set in stone, if that is the case.
  - LW highlighted that communication saying "it's an STFC issue" makes it sound like we're the issue, and makes the community feel attacked from UKRI. IC said he would take that on board.

**Action item: a statement from UKRI/STFC to the community clarifying that this is not a strategic choice to move away from PPAN, and the 30% cut is not set in stone**

### **Current impact assessment process**

- PD noted that community members are being asked to perform the impact assessment at present, that projects are being asked to explain the impact of 20/40/60% cuts in 300-400 words, which is impossible, and that we don't know what the loop of evaluating these proformas will be.
- MD stated that they are expecting proformas back on the 10th March, after which science board will evaluate and put together an option space of 10/20/30% cuts by early June. That will be taken to UKRI by the end of June.
  - MD said "Keith is very keen to engage with the community in this, it won't be done in isolation", and also that they intend to appoint an international review panel to look at the prioritisation.

- GB will discuss with Keith how the community, and particularly ECRs, will contribute to the prioritisation process
- GB confirmed (in response to MW) that in the meantime ongoing CG rounds will continue within the current funding constraints, citing pressures on short term of grants.

**Action item: STFC to confirm concrete pathways for ECRs and the broader community to be part of the prioritisation.**