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MPs wrong on STFC, say 'forgotten' physicists

Particle physics and astronomy woes not the whole story

THE INQUIRY BY MPs into the 2007 science budget allocations presents a one-sided view of events at the Science and Technology Facilities Council, is wrongly harsh on its chief executive, Keith Mason, and overlooks the needs of many of the STFC's users, say an increasingly vocal band of 'forgotten' physicists.

The House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee last week concluded that the problems with the STFC's budget raise "serious questions about the role and performance of the chief executive".

But scientists outside the community nurtured by the former Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council say Mason, who used to run PPARC, has made the best of a difficult situation.

Instead, these users of facilities formerly managed by the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils are angry that so much of the MPs' report, and the debate it has prompted, focuses on particle physics and astronomy—ignoring the needs of other researchers under the STFC's remit.

"The report completely neglects the ex-CCLRC community, and its interests and concerns," Richard Nelmes, a condensed matter physicist and chairman of the multi-disciplinary Centre for Science at Extreme Conditions at the University of Edinburgh, told *Research Fortnight*. "For all the committee's criticism of Keith Mason, he has done a better job than the committee in grappling with, and caring about, the whole large scope of the STFC programme."

Nelmes says the IUSS committee has persistently portrayed particle physicists and astronomers as representing the whole physics community. Other ex-CCLRC users add that cuts to facilities such as ISIS and Diamond have been overshadowed by the uproar surrounding the termination of some rolling grants in particle physics and astronomy.

"The hit, and the delays, and the loss of our scientific lead is being spread across many scientific communities," said Paul McMillan, a chemist at

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University College London. "Astronomy and particle physics are more organised. They can represent more coherently single areas that are going to be affected."

Don Paul, a physics professor at the University of Warwick and chairman of one of the panels looking at responses submitted to the STFC's consultation on its programmatic review, says the cuts being made to the CCLRC side are just as serious as those to the PPARC side. "There is a big asymmetry of funding in STFC: one side has rolling grants while the other has to apply to the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council for funding. When it cuts the running time of ISIS, the STFC is affecting the work of other research councils that fund scientists using that facility."

The MPs' report highlights a lack of consultation as central to the STFC's problems. It cites a private review commissioned by Mason upon first taking over as chief executive as an example of the problematic "secrecy".

But Nelmes is concerned that this has detracted from the issue of the size of the budget given to the STFC in the first place. "The requirements being placed on STFC to do everything with part of its community watching and consulting on its every move and thought seem unreasonable," he said. "This would not be expected from the other research councils."

But Phil Willis, Liberal Democrat chairman of the IUSS Committee, says that recent events demand that the STFC engages more proactively with its community. "You're only able to get away with private management decisions if you have the confidence of the community in which you work," he said. "I accept that chief executives have to operate in real time rather than endlessly procrastinating and consulting every single person working on a project, but when they make a decision, they have to be able to do an audit trail as to why they made that decision. There was no traceable evidence to back up the decisions taken by the STFC."

MPs' IUSS report in full, pages 4, 5 and 17