

Royal Astronomical Society Online Town Hall Meeting

11:00 – 12:45, 29 April 2026

Executive summary

- STFC is facing a projected £162 million overspend by the end of the current spending review due to inflation, rising international subscription costs, and flat cash budgets. To address this, STFC is implementing a transformation programme, which has already included a voluntary exit for 87 staff members and requires difficult choices regarding which projects to "stop or slow".
- The STFC Science Board is currently conducting a "prioritisation exercise" for 48 different projects within the PPAN (Particle Physics, Astronomy, and Nuclear Physics) area. They are modelling scenarios ranging from flat cash to 30% cuts, the latter of which the board described as potentially "catastrophic" for UK science.
- To maintain the volume of postdocs and early-career researchers, STFC has delayed the start dates of some awards and paused large grant awards. While PhD students and Ernest Rutherford Fellowships remain "ring-fenced" from the deepest cuts.
- Community members emphasised that the 30% grant cuts are disproportionate to the UKRI budget, but they could threaten the viability of university physics departments, the loss of a generation of researchers, and the forfeiture of international data access.
- The community expressed deep concern that PPAN funding is being cut to cover a deficit that didn't originate in that area and the failure in communication between the Government, UKRI, STFC and the community.

Introduction

- Prof Jim Wild (President-elect of the Royal Astronomical Society) chaired the meeting to provide continuity as he prepares to take over from Prof Mike Lockwood (President of the Royal Astronomical Society).
- The meeting was called to address urgent community concerns regarding current and future funding issues.
- Representatives from STFC's Executive (Prof Michelle Dougherty and Prof Grahame Blair), Science Board [PPAN] (Prof Keith Grainge) and Advisory Panels (Dr Aprajita Verma and Dr Ashley King) were present to provide updates.
- Due to the high attendance (over 200 people), the meeting used a "webinar mode" where attendees were muted, and questions were managed via Padlet.

STFC Executive Update

Prof Michele Dougherty (Executive Chair) and Prof Grahame Blair (Executive Director)

- UKRI has moved to a new funding structure. STFC now manages its core program and international subscriptions (like CERN and ESA) within the same "bucket," making the budget highly sensitive to foreign exchange rates. A shift in the Swiss Franc alone can create a £15 million swing in costs.
- While the budget appears flat, STFC is facing a £162M shortfall by the end of the spending review. This is caused by inflation, rising university overheads, and the increased cost of running major international facilities.
- Two-thirds of the necessary savings are being found internally through transformation programs and voluntary staff exits.
- To keep as many postdoctoral positions as possible, STFC has delayed the start dates of some awards. While small awards are continuing, large awards are currently paused until the funding situation is clearer.

Science Board [PPAN] Update

Prof Keith Grainge (Chair, Science Board [PPAN])

- The board is currently modelling the impact of budget scenarios ranging from flat cash to a 30% cut. The Board has stated clearly that a 30% cut would be catastrophic for the UK's scientific standing.
- PhD studentships and Ernest Rutherford Fellowships are currently ring-fenced (protected) from these cuts to ensure the next generation of researchers is supported.
- 48 different project line items are being triaged. The board is looking at long-term balance, ensuring the UK doesn't lose key technical capabilities that would take decades to rebuild.
- The Science Board formally advised against merging with the EPSRC, noting that the long-term, multinational nature of astronomy and physics projects does not fit the EPSRC's shorter-term funding model.

Advisory Panel Perspectives

Dr Aprajita Verma (Chair, Astronomy Advisory Panel) and Ashley King (Chair, Solar System Advisory Panel)

- The panels serve as the voice of the researchers, feeding specific concerns about scientific priorities and community health directly to the Science Board.
- For the first time, panel chairs are being invited to observe Science Board sessions to ensure the "narrative" of how these cuts affect real-world science is heard by decision-makers.
- The panels are also working with the UK Space Agency on future funding calls (e.g. the Space Frontiers program) to find alternative opportunities for the community.

Question and Answer Session

PPAN vs. Facility Overspending

Question: Jim Wild (on behalf of Jim Dunlop) asked if "over-ambition" on PPAN projects caused the current funding crisis. He questioned why PPAN faces cuts if curiosity-led research is supposedly protected.

Answer: Michele Dougherty explained that the primary pressure comes from large-scale facilities started in a more affluent economic environment without adequate provision for long-term operating costs. These facilities account for about two-thirds of the required savings. However, in a flat cash environment with high inflation, the PPAN portfolio has become "spread too thinly" and must be prioritised to remain viable.

Postdoc Numbers and the Financial Baseline

Question: Cathie Clarke highlighted that the 2025 postdoc allocation represents a 30% cut compared to 2023. She asked how a target number of new postdocs would be maintained given the impact on international competitiveness.

Answer: Grahame Blair explained that tracking postdoc numbers is complex due to tracking FTE (Full-Time Equivalents) across financial years. He noted:

- STFC is trying to return to the pre-spending review baseline (2025/26), averaging funding levels over that year.
- There was a significant funding uplift in 2023/24 and 2024/25 that is not being continued. Current "cuts" are often a return to the levels seen in 2021/22, representing roughly a 10% change from that earlier period, despite the sharper drop from the recent peak.
- Michele Dougherty clarified that per ministerial steer, she will keep postdoc numbers level by finding money from outside the PPAN pot (e.g., from STFC labs/facilities) to ensure postdocs actually have projects to work on.

Impact Assessment and the Talent Pipeline

Question: Jim Wild asked if the impact assessment would look at the wider impact of the potential cuts beyond PPAN, e.g. to universities, the STEM talent pipeline and the UK economy.

Answer: Michele Dougherty confirmed the assessment will include the impact on external partners. Keith Grainge added that the "Talent Pot" (funding studentships and research

fellowships) is ring-fenced for the entirety of this spending review period and is excluded from the prioritisation process.

Strategic Goals: "Do Fewer Things Better"

Question: An anonymous questioner asked if the UKRI goal to "do fewer things better" implies current projects are "low value."

Answer: Michele Dougherty countered that all current work is world-class. However, since the funding envelope has shrunk, STFC must avoid "salami slicing" (tiny cuts to everyone). Instead, they must fund selected projects fully with the people and money they need to succeed.

Transparency and Community Consultation

Question: Sera Markoff and Sheila Rowan criticised the lack of transparency and the speed of the cuts, which left no time for community consultation.

Answer: Michele Dougherty explained that the government only signed off on the funding allocation on 17 December, making it impossible to share figures earlier. She acknowledged the community's frustration and noted that while there are opportunities in new "buckets" (AI, Quantum, etc.), STFC is still waiting for clarity on when those grant calls will open.

Savings and Decision-Making

Question: Andy Lawrence asked how the UKRI-mandated savings are being distributed, specifically wanting to know the proportion of cuts hitting PPAN science versus STFC's internal facilities. He also sought clarity on the decision-making process for these financial trade-offs and whether the community's burden is proportional to its actual budget size.

Answer: Michele Dougherty outlined that while STFC initially planned to divide budget cuts between PPAN science (one-third) and facilities (two-thirds), ministerial directives on postdoc retention are forcing a re-evaluation of this split.

In response to questions from Andy Lawrence regarding transparency and fairness, she noted that the executive team makes final decisions based on advisory input, that industrial revenue is being explored to reduce facility costs, and that new, separate "bucket" budgeting for facilities and science aims to improve financial balance.

Proportionality of the Savings

Question: Carlos Frenk argued that cutting £15–20 million from grants is an insignificant fraction of the £1 billion UKRI budget, yet it risks the collapse of entire physics departments.

Answer: Grahame Blair provided some quantification of the numbers:

- Total annual PPAN Grant Spend was Typically between £70–80 million.
- A 30% reduction equals roughly £15–20 million over three years.
- Stopping projects also risks losing access to international data and facilities such as the European Southern Observatory.

Michele Dougherty stated that while the impact is disproportionate, STFC is legally bound to the budget provided and must use the prioritisation process to prove the damage to the government.

Conflict of Interest

Question: an anonymous questioner has asked if Michele Dougherty has a conflict of interest as both STFC Executive Chair and the Astronomer Royal.

Answer: Michele Dougherty clarified the Astronomer Royal is an honorary, unpaid role focused on public outreach. She stepped back from being the President of the Institute of Physics as that was a conflict. She believes that having an astronomer lead STFC during a financial crisis is a benefit to the community.

Call to Action

At the end of the session, Prof Catherine Heymans (the Astronomer Royal for Scotland) issued a call to action centred on protecting the next generation of scientists and ensuring transparency in decision-making.

Her primary points included:

- She urged the community to make the case that UKRI and STFC should reverse what she described as "existential" and "catastrophic" cuts to the field.
- She questioned the transparency of the current numbers, noting that even the STFC Council seemed unaware of the exact figures as late as mid-December. She explicitly demanded to know who made the decision to move funding away from curiosity-driven research and what evidence was used to justify it.
- Heymans highlighted a logical disconnect where the government claims to support science while presiding over a 30% cut that will devastate the talent pipeline. She argued it is unjust for ECRs to "take the brunt" of increased facility costs they did not cause.
- She warned that the timing is uniquely poor, coming just as major international facilities like the Rubin Observatory are set to deliver data, the UK risks having no astronomers left to work on them. She urged politicians to consider the long-term economic and scientific damage before it is "too late".

In summary, her call to action was a plea for a nuanced, evidence-based discussion that treats the funding crisis as a national strategic issue rather than a purely internal STFC problem to be solved by cutting grants.