

19th March 2026

Dear Michele, Sir Ian,

During our discussion with you (Michele) at the recent SB PPAN meeting, you asked us to consider how one might best resolve the PPAN science vs Facilities tension, including our view on the speculation of a potential merger of PPAN and EPSRC.

We did discuss this in some detail at the October 2025 meeting of the two science boards – PPAN and Facilities & Labs. PPAN science is typically long term, multi-national and uses large state -of-the art equipment built by the same community, or a very closely linked one, that subsequently operates and exploits the equipment. This model of supporting long-term national participation in major international projects has led to extensive UK leadership, and is standard across Europe and internationally, where nuclear physics, particle physics and astronomy programmes are typically funded through dedicated national structures designed to sustain multi-decade scientific collaborations. In these aspects it is very different to typical EPSRC-style research, which is typically shorter term, more opportunity-driven and more individual. Whilst such research may require access to large-scale facilities, most individuals do so as users rather than as communities responsible for building and operating the facilities.

These are not new observations but simply reflect the different nature of the science involved and hence the way in which it is most effectively carried out and supported by Government. Previous approaches either with some of PPAN science separate from both Facilities and EPSRC as in PPARC, or indeed as STFC with effective hard partitions between Facilities and PPAN science recognised this. The experience of both PPARC and STFC demonstrates that supporting PPAN science alongside major facilities can work effectively, provided that clear and robust partitions are maintained between the science grants line and facility-related costs. Ensuring that the PPAN science programme is protected within this structure is essential for sustaining the long-term research ecosystem on which the field depends. This is particularly important given that the users of many facilities now extend well beyond the PPAN community (a development that reflects the success of the STFC model), even though many of these facilities were originally developed and are operated by PPAN-led collaborations.

The option to merge EPSRC and PPARC was considered several times after their creation, together with other research councils, from SERC in 1994. A merge was never considered advisable – and the arguments for this have not changed. It is about ensuring that each style of research has the ‘eco-system’ to best flourish, and in so doing maximising both UK scientific leadership and the return to UKplc. The issue is therefore not whether PPAN science can compete with other disciplines; experience shows that it does so very successfully, including in open schemes such as the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships. The question instead is ensuring that the funding structures appropriately support the long-term, collaborative nature of PPAN research and the associated communities.

The SB PPAN recommendation remains as it was in October of last year. We must learn the lessons of the past to resolve the PPAN science vs Facilities tension. This either requires establishing a PPARC like structure which would fund long-term science in nuclear physics, particle physics and astronomy or establishing proper partitions between the PPAN science and Facilities lines as well as altering the operational costing model for the latter. SB PPAN considers that integrating PPAN science into EPSRC would weaken the structures that sustain UK leadership in nuclear physics, particle physics and astronomy and vehemently opposes

such a move. We note that UKRI, STFC, DSIT, UKSA and the wider space STFC community are striving to better co-ordinate and prioritise Space-related science, including through SpaceFrontiers2035. Merging EPSRC and PPAN would throw that process into confusion.

You asked us to consult across the community on this topic, and we will do, but wished to promptly re-iterate the position of SB PPAN.

Your sincerely,



Keith Grainge
Chair
On behalf of STFC Science Board PPAN

STFC Science Board PPAN members:

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Anthony Challinor
Judith Croston
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