



Royal
Astronomical
Society

The Lord Vallance of Balham KCB
Minister of State for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear
Department of Science, Innovation and Technology
22-26 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2EG

CC:

Professor Sir Ian Chapman, CEO, UK Research and Innovation
Professor Michele Dougherty, Executive Chair, Science and Technology Facilities
Council
Science Board (PPAN), Science and Technology Facilities Council

12 May 2026

Dear Lord Vallance,

Scope of impact assessment for STFC cuts

We are writing to you as the Presidents of the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) and the Institute of Physics (IOP) to ask you to seek a full assessment of the impact of the cuts proposed to the particle physics, astronomy and nuclear (PPAN) budgets of the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC).

As you know, the RAS represents more than 4,000 members (Fellows), three quarters of whom are based in the UK, and around half are involved in professional astronomy, space science and geophysics in some capacity. The Institute of Physics represents over 22,000 members working in occupations related to physics, including in academic and industrial research in the PPAN area.

The chair of STFC's PPAN Science Board, Professor Keith Grainge, confirms that he will lead a prioritisation exercise based on the potential cuts to PPAN science. While we in no way support the cuts, we welcome this engagement with the scientific community, but believe that its scope is far too limited¹.

¹ RAS Astronomy Forum, 22 April 2026

There are significant wider consequences from the proposals that fall beyond the current STFC assessment remit. In particular, the proposed reductions risk serious adverse impacts on university physics and astronomy departments. At a time when many higher education institutions are already facing acute financial pressures, further funding shocks could accelerate course closures, reduce research capacity, and weaken the sustainability of departments that are critical to the UK's skills pipeline.

While we welcome the commitment to 2025/26 postdoc numbers we are concerned as the proposed reductions will still threaten the recruitment of young people into science and risks reducing the supply of doctoral graduates into the wider economy, particularly if project cancellations lead to fewer postgraduate opportunities.

In parallel, these decisions carry important implications for the UK's international standing. Withdrawal from major programmes or a perceived instability in funding risks undermining our position as a trusted and reliable global partner in science, with long-term consequences for collaboration, influence, and the UK's ability to attract and retain world-class talent.

The IOP recently published evidence indicating that over a quarter of physics departments in universities are already at risk of closure². Many of these depend heavily on STFC research grants, which enable them to carry out programmes that make their departments appealing to undergraduates. As so called 'STEM attractors', there is related evidence that PPAN science is cited by 50% of physics undergraduates as a key reason for their choice of degree programme.

In addition, the follow up evidence supplied to the Commons Select Committee on Science, Innovation and Technology by Professor Catherine Heymans (Astronomer Royal for Scotland), Professor Jon Butterworth and Dr Simon Williams included a survey of the destinations of PhD graduates. It demonstrated that after a decade around three quarters take their skills into the wider economy in areas including data science, AI, defence, teaching and finance, all critical areas for the UK³. In these and other ways, PPAN plays a vital role in the supply of skills such as data acquisition,

² <https://www.iop.org/about/publications/physics-matters-funding-the-foundations-of-growth>

³ Correspondence from Professor Jon Butterworth, Professor Catherine Heymans and Dr Simon Williams, re: Follow-ups from 4 March oral evidence session on Scientific research funding, 9 April 2026
<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/52795/documents/294192/default/>

electronics, engineering and computing that are greatly valued in sectors such as defence, automotive, aerospace and other growth driving sectors of the economy.

We support the ambition for science to drive growth and welcome additional investments in areas such as quantum, fusion and AI. However, particle physics, astronomy and nuclear are fundamental disciplinary pillars and we are concerned that further reductions to funding for these areas will jeopardise the flow of people, skills and knowledge into growth driving industries.

Given the scale of the proposed cuts to PPAN science grants, still likely to be of the order of 30%, it is of vital importance that the leaderships of STFC and UKRI, and Government ministers in DSIT and also in DfE, are fully apprised of their consequences.

It is our understanding from your public statements that these cuts are yet to be finalised. We therefore urge you to commission a wider study of their impacts, not just on research, but on higher education and the economy as a whole.

Both our organisations would be very happy to assist with this work, and we would of course be delighted to meet you to discuss our concerns in more detail.

Please contact Prof. Robert Massey, the RAS Deputy Executive Director, via rmassey@ras.ac.uk if you would like to do so.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Jim Wild
President, Royal Astronomical Society



Professor Paul Howarth CBE
President, Institute of Physics