Science and Technology Facilities Council

AGREED MINUTES OF THE THIRTY-SEVENTH MEETING OF STFC COUNCIL
HELD BY VIDEOCONFERENCE
ON 18th July 2024

Attendees		
Council Members:	Mark Thomson (chair) (MAT) Andy Schofield (AJS) Jon Butterworth (JMB) Lucy Edge (LE) JT Janssen (JTJ) Jana Koar (JK) Patricia Hodgson (PH) Hiranya Peiris (HP) Hitesh Thakrar (HT) Carsten Welsch (CPW)	**Observers**: Paul Monks (PM), DESNZ CSA Keith Grainge (KG), Chair of Science Board (PPAN) Jacqui Cole (JC), Chair of Science Board (F&L) **Secretariat:** Maya Riddle (MR) Janice Masone (JM), Secretariat
Invited Guests:	**Item 4:** Tom Griffin, Director of Scientific Computing; Dave Newbold, Exec Director National Labs Science & Technology **Item 5:** Chris Wrench, Finance Director; Georgia Giatras, COO **Item 7:** Patrick Middleton, Deputy Director, UKRI External Affairs & Comms **Items 7 & 8:** Liz Fellman, Exec Director Strategy, Planning & Comms; Georgia Giatras; Rosanna Greenop & Susanna Mitolo (Strategy team)	
Apologies:	Michele Dougherty (MKD) Pam Thomas (PT)	

Chair: Mark Thomson		
1.	**Welcome and opening comments**	
	1.1	Mark Thomson (MAT) welcomed everyone to the thirty-seventh meeting of STFC Council, which was held by videoconference.
	1.2	The following points regarding attendance were noted: i. Apologies were noted from Michele Dougherty (MKD) and Pam Thomas (PT)
	1.3	MAT reminded Council members that they are required to keep the Secretary informed of any changes to their personal register of interests as they arise.
2.	**Minutes, Actions and Matters Arising and Actions from the meeting held on 14th May 2024**	
	2.1	**Minutes** Subject to some minor amendments which have now been actioned, Council approved the minutes as an accurate record of the meetings held on 14th May 2024.
	2.2	**Actions** The actions from previous meetings were reviewed and were either complete or in progress. More detail on progress can be found in the Action Register which is an annex to these minutes
	2.3	**Matters Arising** The following matters arose from discussion of the minutes and actions. i. The most recent draft version of the STFC brochure, which has been designed with senior government officials and ministers in mind, is available on the Council SharePoint site. MAT encouraged all Council members to review and provide feedback to Maya Riddle (MR) by email. ii. At the last meeting the issue of scaling programme/laboratory activity to fit the budget, and the impact on the community, was raised by Council members. This will be in the remit of the new Science Boards. Council felt strongly that it should have oversight and the opportunity to challenge and advise the Executive, and it was confirmed that this will be included in the reports from both Science Boards to Council.
Chair: Andy Schofield		
3.	**Executive Chair Update**	
	3.1	Andy Schofield (AJS) invited Mark Thomson (MAT) to give an update to Council on key issues since the last meeting.
	3.2	**People** MAT's presentation included an update on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and early results from the most recent People Survey. i. **EDI**: STFC's newly appointed EDI manager, Amarjit Bassan has made a strong start in his role. Council is looking forward to meeting him in due course. Jonathan Butterworth (JB) offered to put him in touch with CERN's Head of Diversity and will send contact details to Maya Riddle (MR). ii. **10k Black Interns (10kBI):** Council was pleased to note the that the 10kBI scheme began on 15th July and it was universally agreed that the scheme had attracted a high calibre of candidate. Noting that career progression is an issue

		for underrepresented groups, Hitesh Thakrar (HT) offered his expertise to the group. MR will follow up with HT outside the meeting.
		iii. **People Survey:** MAT reported that the most recent People Survey had yielded positive results for STFC with over 2000 staff responding.
		iv. Council noted improved results for pay and asked whether this was also true for scientific staff. MAT confirmed that detailed analysis, down to department level, is still being worked through and will indicate feelings about pay in specific areas as well as highlighting any local issues that may need to be addressed. Results will go into producing departmental and STFC-wide actions plas.
	3.3	<u>**Strategic Update**</u> MAT's presentation included an overview of some of the strategic issues currently occupying STFC's leadership. Discussion focused on UKRI and STFC engagement with the new UK government and plans for Boulby Laboratory. i. **New UK government:** Council felt encouraged by key appointments in the science and technology space and the expansion and refocusing of DSIT on to digital innovation. The new government has indicated an interest in developing longer term scientific policy. Council advised highlighting the skills agenda, linked to the core programme and national labs capabilities. ii. **Boulby:** Council was very positive about developments at Boulby and was supportive of STFC including establishing the laboratory as a Spending Review Priority for the organisation. Council members gave a strong steer about engaging internationally for funding and collaboration, particularly through [ESFRI](#) and felt there were benefits to be gained from being on the ESFRI roadmap. iii. Several Council members had already visited the Boulby site, and had been especially impressed with the plans to build in environmentally sustainable, low carbon operations. Council expressed a keen interest in receiving an update, particularly focused on the development of environmentally sustainable operations.
	3.4	<u>**DSIT Space Review**</u> MAT outlined the recommendations arising from the recently concluded DSIT Space Review and sought views from Council. The purpose of the review was to examine how different organisations in the UK space ecosystem contribute to the government's civil space ambitions and highlight opportunities for improvement. i. Overall, Council felt the recommendations were sensible and appropriate, clarifying roles and responsibilities and adopting a more collaborative approach within the space delivery system will be of benefit to the UK in the longer term. ii. Council agreed with MAT's view that the recommendation to introduce cross-agency governance was critically important to get right for future success. iii. Council considered that the recommendation to extend the STFC-UKSA "dual key" relationship likely referred to looking beyond astronomy. MAT plans to seek clarification on this as soon as possible.
	3.5	<u>**AI & Quantum**</u> Following the very constructive joint meeting of EPSRC and STFC Council, a meeting was held between STFC and EPSRC Executive Chairs and SIMS. At this meeting it was agreed to set up a joint task and finish group to establish and clarify what distinct roles and dependencies STFC and EPSRC have in both AI and Quantum, plus all

		aspects of infrastructure and application of these technologies.
		i. Council welcomed this news. Developing a strong position with well understood boundaries describing how STFC/EPSRC will contribute to this work is a positive development.
		ii. Recognising the new government's appetite for the further development and application of AI, Council gave a strong steer to prioritise engagement with DSIT, particularly in considering the development of data libraries and focusing on delivering infrastructure on time and on budget.
	3.6	**Live Issues** MAT gave an update on some of the key issues facing STFC which included the continued development of the UKRI Operating model and Opex Challenge, Financial Sustainability, UKRI change programmes and SKA. i. **Opex Challenge:** MAT cautioned that due to a lack of resource, STFC will need to cease or pause activities, and this will be visible to the community. ii. **Financial sustainability**: Severe pressures on budgets for STFC facilities and laboratory departments along with pay and other inflationary pressures will result in a challenging position for STFC to manage. iii. **UKRI Change Programmes:** Both the Simpler Better Funding (SBF) and Oracle Upgrade projects are experiencing significant delays. Council expressed gratitude to colleagues that are continuing to represent STFC's interests in both cases. iv. **SKA**: MAT flagged that budgets for SKA are indexed and this is particularly difficult in Western Australia. MAT is highlighting this to Council for awareness as there could be similar pressures arising with other international subscriptions.
Chair: Mark Thomson		
4.	**STFC community Exascale requirements**	
	4.1	Council welcomed Dave Newbold (DN) and Tom Griffin (TG) to the meeting. TG and DN gave an overview of the membership and remit of a working group which was established to seek input from STFC's research community on future Exascale requirements. Outcomes will be fed into STFC's wider review of compute and UKRI Digital Research Infrastructure (DRI) programme.
	4.2	Council offered the following observations and feedback: . i. Initial reactions from Council members were that data, quantum and facilities were mentioned only briefly in the document and it might be beneficial to expand on how STFC plans to leverage these technologies. ii. Council noted this is a community developed paper, TG and DN emphasised may not match available funding but felt that a flexible, inclusive approach to developing the requirements would in the end yield better results than a monolithic approach. iii. Council members noted the unique range and scale of datasets across government, industry and academia and felt strongly that the UK needs its own solution. STFC should take this opportunity to be ambitious in placing itself at the centre of this activity as it develops. Coupled with this, Council advised clarifying what a Foundational Model means in this context, providing a clear definition

could help align everyone's understanding

    iv. Council advised emphasising STFC's commitment to sustainable practices and plans to integrate this into any Exascale requirement.

    v. Overall, Council members were very supportive of the document and direction of travel and thanked TG, DN and colleagues for embarking on this important piece of work. TG and DN confirmed that there are plans to draft a compelling, focused summary which will take into account feedback from Council and highlight key priorities, including upskilling users once the machine is in place.

5.	**Finance & Budget update**	
	5.1	Council welcomed Chris Wrench (CW) and Georgia Giatras (GG) to the meeting to give the financial update. The update covered FY24/25 budget allocations and pressures management and preparations for FY25/26 and longer-term financial plans.

	5.2	**FY2024/25 Budget Allocations**
		At the last Council meeting (May 2024) the Finance team outlined the programming options and further actions undertaken to meet STFC's baseline budgets by reducing the pressures on the core funding allocations and prepare for the likelihood of further UKRI reductions. Specific points raised in discussion are note below:
		
		    i. Council asked for more information on STFC's workforce planning measures and heard that the recruitment controls such as stringent approval processes for new posts, not backfilling or filling posts internally are still bedding in before the full impact can be assessed. It is hoped a clearer picture will emerge in the next quarter.
		
		    ii. Council sought assurance that plans to reduce energy consumption would not negatively impact on science, specifically compute power. MAT confirmed that STFC is doing all it can to increase efficiency without compromising capability and is expecting to be able to maintain based on current Q1 forecasts, however this will be reviewed when Q2 results are in. Council encouraged STFC to pursue solar, and other options for reducing energy consumption.
		
		    iii. Other actions undertaken and their outcomes as detailed in the paper were noted by Council.

	5.3	**FY2025/26 and longer-term planning**
		For FY2025/26, UKRI recently issued a commission to understand funding pressures based on the assumption of a flat roll-forward of the original SR21 FY24/25 council allocation as set in 2022. STFC's opening pressures position is significantly over the baseline.
		
		    i. Council heard that there are various contributory factors including pay, NQCC operating costs, LBNF DUNE, no cost grant extensions (NCE), Spectrum fees, nuclear regulatory building, critical estates requirements and the impact of weakened foreign exchange rates since 2022 on international subscriptions operating pressures. This excludes any additional costs of delivering SKAO or ESS which are being dealt with separately.
		
		    ii. MAT cautioned that the expectation is there will be very little flexibility, STFC will need to prioritise and stop or defer activities to meet its expected allocation. The Science Board (PPAN) prioritisation exercise will provide important advice to the Executive, Council will have the opportunity to review and provide feedback and

		advice on the outputs and recommendations.
		iii. Council expressed concern that small cuts could have longer term strategic implications and advised STFC to be aware of the consequences when making decisions.
		iv. Council was supportive of refreshing the directorate and departmental 10-year plans and agreed this will assist Science Board (PPAN) in its deliberations.
		v. Council appreciated the discussion around the financial challenges facing STFC and the complexity of the landscape. Council thanked CW, GG and their team for the huge amount of work that has gone into managing the budgets.
6.	**Science Board Updates**	
	6.1	**Science Board PPAN** MAT invited Keith Grainge (KG) to give an update from the most recent meeting of Science Board (PPAN) which took place on 12th & 13th June 2024
	6.2	Council considered the recommendations and issues raised by Science Board (PPAN) in its report. The following points were raised in discussion: i. Council agreed with the recommendation for STFC to fund two thirds of the QTFP PDRAs for 12 months. Current funding finishes in March 2025 but is expecting to be extended. Council strongly advised maintaining the skills base in this area. ii. Council concurred with Science Board (PPAN)'s recommendation that STFC should not seek access to CTA beyond what is provided through ESO membership. MAT confirmed that STFC is awaiting decision from DSIT on this matter. iii. Council shared Science Boad (PPAN)'s concerns about pressures on the programme impacting on STFC's ability to fund and support science. iv. Council was very concerned to note serious issues with The Funding Service (TFS) including poor user experience. It was confirmed that STFC has a temporary workaround identified but Council supported the view of Science Board (PPAN) that STFC should actively pursue a permanent resolution. v. Council was pleased to hear SB PPAN's plans for developing a PPAN roadmap and are looking forward to having the opportunity review outputs.
	6.3	**Science Board Update (Facilities and Labs)** Jacqui Cole (JC) was invited to give an update from the second meeting of Science Board (Facilities and Laboratories) which took place on 4-5 June 2024.
	7.3	On behalf of the Board, JC highlighted the following issues which were noted by Council: i. Science Board (FL) appreciated the opportunity to tour Daresbury Laboratory and wished to formally express thanks to Paul Vernon and colleagues for their time and expertise. ii. The Quantum Strategy and Exascale requirement items were both viewed positively by the Board as providing a good foundation for forward planning in

		these rapidly developing areas.
		iii. Science Board (FL) discussed the progress on developing the PPAN roadmap and is keen to see a forward-looking strategy and better integration with the departments.
		iv. Council agreed with the Board's view that the issues of environmental sustainability are multi-faceted STFC, and care should be taken to avoid unintended impact on science delivery. Related to this, Council shared the Board's concerns regarding the operation of ISIS in the context of the forthcoming ILL shutdown and the delays to operating ESS, Council gave a strong steer to the Executive to prioritise ISIS operations in any budget discussion.
7.	**New Government briefing**	
	7.1	Council welcomed Patrick Middleton (PM), Liz Fellman (LF), Susana Mitolo (SM), Rosanna Greenop (RG) and Georgia Giatras (GG) to the meeting. MAT invited PM to lead the discussion.
	7.2	PM began by outlining the new government's key initiatives, relevant appointments and the expansion of DSIT's remit to encompass Digital Transformation for Public Services. Early meetings between the Secretary of State, Science Minister and UKRI's CEO and Chair have been collaborative and enthusiastic with a sense of urgency, pace and the sense that Research and Innovation will have a strong role in supporting a government of service with a strong focus on delivery.
		i. Council members made several helpful observations from their own areas of expertise t which were noted by PM.
		ii. PM thanked Council for their time and encouraged members to contact him directly with any further intelligence or case studies which will enable UKRI to continue to play a pivotal role in delivering the new government's aims and initiatives.
8.	**Spending Review (SR) update and priorities**	
	8.1	Rosanna Greenop (RG) led this discussion, supported by Liz Fellman (LF), Georgia Giatras (GG) and Susana Mitolo (SM).
	8.2	With the appointment of the new government, the likelihood of a multi-year SR has increased and in anticipation, UKRI has officially launched its Spending Review (SR) preparation. STFC has developed a list of priorities and accompanied by a draft compelling narrative for each. Further work is now needed to align these priorities with those of the new Government, identify the best funding routes and determine where we can input into the broader SR work across UKRI. Council was invited to advise and make recommendations.

	8.3	Council advised grouping the most SR-relevant priorities under three main pillars, with a clear caveat that these cannot be delivered without investing in supporting capabilities. The three main pillars Council suggested next to the most SR-relevant priorities are:
		i. **Data as a national resource**: This links to the STFC priority relating to Investing in a National Capability to exploit Big Data. STFC in collaboration with other research councils, to provide a national data storage, computing and processing capabilities, using data generated within our national and international facilities (and core PPAN programmes).
		ii. **Discovery research:** This is most relevant to STFC's priority to establish a National Underground Science Laboratory at Boulby. This pillar highlights STFC's unique contribution to UKRI and the UK in curiosity-driven scientific research unbound by a specific mission or goal.
		iii. **Research and innovation for Growth:** This is most closely related to STFC's priority to establish the Space Gateway and demonstrates that STFC is best placed to drive science and technology developments to foster economic growth for the nation.
		iv. Council recommended that STFC's priorities for achieving financial sustainability for the UK's National Laboratories and Facilities, contributing to the financial sustainability of the UK's universities and investing in STFC's estates should be viewed as supporting capabilities for delivering the three pillars mentioned above.
		v. The team thanked Council for their recommendations which will be iterated with senior STFC colleagues and further discussed at the next Council meeting.
9.	**Any other business**	
	9.1	The following additional business was raised at the meeting: i. Council asked STFC to ensure that publishing of Council minutes is up to date on the UKRI website. It was felt this was particularly important given the forthcoming prioritisation update
10.	**Closing Remarks** MAT thanked members and guests for their contribution. The next meeting will be held at the The Slate, Warwick University on 10th September.	