



Science and Technology Committee

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From Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Chair

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister
(By e-mail)

23 March 2021

Dear Prime Minister,

Cuts to scientific research

I am writing to you in my capacity as Chair of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee.

My Committee strongly welcomes the Government's commitments to science as exemplified by the commitment to increase public R&D expenditure to £22bn a year by 2024–25, to invest 2.4% of GDP in R&D by 2027, and last week the clear focus of the UK being a science superpower in the Integrated Review.

The last year has demonstrated the vital importance of science and the brilliance of UK scientists.

It is deeply concerning that at the very moment when the whole country recognises the importance of scientific research and when a Government has been elected with a promise to double the budget for research, that the science budget should be facing immediate and substantial cuts involving the cancellation of current research.

Scientists such as Sir Jeremy Farrar, Director of Wellcome, who has been a leading member of SAGE throughout the pandemic, and our institutions of global repute such as the Royal Society, have expressed their alarm at the consequences of three developments in particular.

First, it has been suggested that the UK's participation in Horizon Europe will be funded (at a cost of £2bn/year) from the BEIS science budget. While the UK was a Member State this formed part of the UK's overall subscription to the European Union and was always accepted to be additional to the BEIS science/R&D budget.

To now deduct this from the science budget would reduce the UKRI budget for science and research by nearly a quarter just at the point when it was expected that resources would be increasing. That would be a devastating reduction which would reverse two years of intended increases and mean that the ambition for Britain to be a Science Superpower would be deferred for much of this Parliament.

Second, scientific collaboration with developing countries has been a key component of the UK's ODA expenditure. It was therefore concerning to see on 11 March 2021 that UKRI had to announce that the "BEIS ODA allocation to UKRI has reduced significantly in planned ODA expenditure for 2021–22, leading to a £125 million budget and a

£120 million gap between allocations and commitments”.¹ It added that this would have “whole-system impacts in the UK and overseas” with research programmes currently underway being terminated.

Third, as a result of the pandemic, medical research charities—such as Cancer Research UK and the British Heart Foundation—have seen their fundraising income fall by 41%. Whereas the Government has made funding available to “frontline” charities to maintain operations to support the public during the pandemic, medical research charities have not received similar support. It is clearly of huge public importance that medical research that can save millions of lives should not have to be cancelled. The Association of Medical Research Charities proposed a Life Sciences-Charity Partnership Fund to use the Government’s existing commitments to increase science funding to allow these research programmes to continue, but the Government has not yet taken this or something similar forward.²

My Committee raised these issues with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy last week and he showed appreciation of the concerns and said that he was working to address them.

In the midst of a global pandemic, where we owe so much to science, and at a time when the Government has rightly chosen to double our national commitment to science, it would be paradoxical if science funding were cut.

Knowing how personally important the UK’s strength in science is to you and to the Government, and at this moment of maximum recognition of its impact, I would appreciate your personal attention to resolving this urgent situation.

As is usual with the Committee’s correspondence, I will place this letter in the public domain.

With best wishes,



Rt Hon Greg Clark MP
Chair

¹ <https://www.ukri.org/our-work/ukri-oda-letter-11-march-2021/>

² <https://www.amrc.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=1cf57b61-5794-46ff-b3a6-0814bc6e9127>