

1 April 2026

Dame Chi Onwurah,
Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Select Committee of the House of Commons
By email to commonssitc@parliament.uk

Dear Dame Chi,

I feel compelled to write to address several points in the recent letter to you from Lord Vallance and Sir Ian Chapman (henceforth “the letter”). For context, I am Principal Investigator of the LHCb 2030+ project, which is one of the projects that is “no longer prioritised” (i.e. cut) in the UKRI Infrastructure Fund. I am also Spokesperson-elect for the international LHCb collaboration, and a member of STFC’s Science Board (PPAN).

Support for post-doctoral researchers

The statements in the letter regarding post-doctoral researchers appear to be based on a misunderstanding. There is a reference to the “STFC budget for training and skills that supports such positions”, which is increasing over the spending review period. This refers to the “talent” funding line, which supports PhD studentships and STFC’s Ernest Rutherford Fellowship (ERF) Scheme, and is indeed protected. However, there are a grand total of seven ERFs awarded per year. The vast majority of the several hundred post-docs working in the PPAN programme are funded by grants and project awards – precisely the areas which are threatened by the 30% cuts STFC is in the process of making (or, to use the language of the letter, “modelling”). If Lord Vallance and Sir Ian are genuine in their reassurance that the current level of post-docs in the PPAN programme will be maintained across the SR period, the only way to achieve this is to cancel the proposed 30% cuts and instead award an inflationary uplift to the PPAN programme. This, by the way, would be an eminently sensible thing to do, for many reasons that other correspondents – including the ECRs themselves – have clearly expressed to you.

The descope of the Infrastructure Fund award for the LHCb Upgrade

Regarding LHCb, the letter states that the “project was awarded separate scoping funding in an earlier round of the Infrastructure Fund to derisk future potential work.” In fact, LHCb 2030+ was awarded in 2022 as a full project, as UKRI’s own webpage [1] still shows at the time of writing. We on the project had understood that the funding would be released in tranches, with an initial three-year “preconstruction” project and then, subject to business case approval, the remainder of the funding for the construction phase. We were advised by STFC in 2023 that the initial phase would be classed as a preliminary activity and the remainder as the full infrastructure activity, but were under the impression that this was a mere technicality to allow the initial phase to commence without delay. We were never informed that any additional review by the Infrastructure Advisory Committee would be necessary for the remainder of the funding to be released. As far as I can tell, STFC staff were likewise unaware of this.

Our focus was therefore on the business case, which we worked closely together with STFC and UKRI colleagues to prepare, and which was submitted to STFC on the agreed schedule in November 2025. This document however has not been reviewed and was not part of the UKRI decision making process; as far as I know, it has never been passed from STFC executive to UKRI for review. In expectation of the funding being released, STFC staff organised, in the second half of 2025, a peer review process to scrutinise our plans for the next phase of the project. This was completed successfully with a positive recommendation to proceed.

As noted above, there was never any indication made to the collaboration that a further application to the Infrastructure Fund would be needed, and we were never contacted to prepare or even contribute to such an application (in contrast, we worked closely with STFC colleagues to prepare the original application from 2021). The first we knew about the funding being reconsidered was on December 19th 2025, when we were informed brusquely of the outcome; it appears that STFC staff responsible for managing the particle physics programme were likewise blindsided by this news.

Thus, if the statement in the letter “This is made clear to all projects” refers to the process that has been used, it is factually incorrect. In fact, despite repeatedly asking Sir Ian, the process remains opaque to the extent that I do not even know which document was used for the basis of the review, although I believe it to have been our original Infrastructure Fund application, prepared in 2021. It seems implausible that such important decisions, tensioning previously awarded grants against new proposals, should be made on the basis of 4 year old documentation, but this seems to be the only possibility.

The letter notes that “It is a feature of competitive grant funding that we always receive many more good ideas than we can afford to fund.” This is indeed completely normal, and so long as the balance is within a reasonable range is a sign of a healthy funding ecosystem. What is not normal at all – and moreover is damaging to that ecosystem – is to remove funding from approved projects without informing those projects and those who manage them that they are under review, or even allowing for up-to-date information to be made available to the committee who are tasked with making the funding decisions.

Tensioning versus partitioning for international subscriptions

A point raised several times in the letter is that “it is appropriate to tension the PPAN grants portfolio against large facilities, such as CERN or ESO”, “cost pressures should be tensioned in an appropriate way” and “subscriptions should be tensioned in an appropriate way”. Despite the emphasis placed on this “appropriateness”, it should be noted this represents a change of policy, and that the previous policy was there for a very good reason. At the risk of stating the obvious, international subscriptions are protected by treaty obligations and therefore cannot be “tensioned” in any meaningful way against discretionary funding. With the domestic PPAN programme having been eroded by flat cash settlements over many years, the approach described as “appropriate” in the letter leads inevitably to a situation where the UK is not able to capitalise on its investments in the facilities. This impacts not only our scientific return and leadership of international projects, but also return to UK industry as well as training and education opportunities for future generations. The Drayson partitions were set up explicitly to “avoid the transfer of possible future financial pressures to other parts of the programme, especially university grants” [2]; without something like them, this problem is certain to occur again.

At a later point in the letter, related to the cut of the Infrastructure Fund award for the LHCb Upgrade, it is noted that the UK is “the second-largest contributor to CERN” but “that does not mean funding every project at the organisation”. Of course it doesn’t. In fact, UK involvement in CERN experiments is already much more focussed than, for example, Germany, Italy and France. Our effort on the flagship LHC experiments is predominantly on only two out of four, namely ATLAS and LHCb. This strategy of focussing our efforts has paid off significantly in terms of scientific leadership and productivity; it is an excellent example of “doing fewer things better”, as UKRI encourages us to do. But it seems UKRI/STFC are now unable even to support UK effort at appropriate levels in these two experiments, demonstrating clearly the problems that arise when the partitions are not respected.

It may also be worth noting that, while the CERN and ESO subscriptions are principally for the benefit of the PPAN programme, they bring a wide-range of additional benefits. For example, it is unlikely that the UK would now be hosting hadrotherapy facilities for cancer treatment without membership of CERN, where developments of accelerators for medical use continue. Many other benefits accruing from membership of CERN are set out in the UKRI publication “Evaluation of the benefits of the UK’s membership of CERN” [3].

Potential reorganisation of the research councils

Concerning the division of topics between research councils, the letter states “The only sensible alternative to oversee the PPAN portfolio other than STFC would be the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC).” There is however another perfectly sensible alternative, which was in place prior to the creation of STFC, namely a dedicated research council for PPAN sciences (the relevant predecessor to STFC being PPARC). There is a very good reason to have separate research councils for PPAN and the rest of the physical sciences, which is that PPAN communities design, construct and exploit experiments in large international consortia over timescales of decades. This model is alien to EPSRC, where the construction and operation of facilities is done by separate communities to those who exploit them. A “one-size-fits” all approach simply won’t work. This is why separate PPARC and EPSRC councils were created when SERC was broken up back in 1994, and is also the reason that nuclear physics, which was not in the remit of PPARC, was moved from EPSRC into STFC.

Can STFC manage its budget?

Finally, the letter states that “modelling different fiscal scenarios is very standard practice in allocation of funding for research”. Indeed it is, and until last year STFC Science Board were well advanced in a process to model different plausible fiscal scenarios, over a ten year roadmap. This process had started in late 2023 and was due to complete in 2025, but had to be put on hold when it became clear around April/May 2025 that UKRI was planning significant cuts to the STFC budget (i.e. the scenarios previously considered plausible were no longer relevant). I mention this to counter a potentially incorrect impression that there has been no budget control and no prioritisation of programmes at STFC. In fact the PPAN programme is already focussed on the highest priority projects, which is why the proposed 30% cuts will be so devastating.

There are also further points I could comment on, but I do not wish to demand too much of your time and attention. I hope this makes clear how concerned I am about the situation, including that Lord Vallance and Sir Ian appear to have some facts incorrect in their letter to you. I thank you for your attention to this matter and will be at your service in case I can be of any assistance.

Best wishes
Tim Gershon

- [1] <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/creating-world-class-research-and-innovation-infrastructure/funded-infrastructure-projects/>
- [2] <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7bff7e40f0b63f7572ab58/1643.pdf>
- [3] <https://www.ukri.org/publications/evaluation-of-benefits-of-the-uk-cern-partnership/>