

2 Apr 2026

COMMENTS ON THE WRITTEN RESPONSE OF LORD VALLANCE AND SIR IAN CHAPMAN, DATED 19th MARCH, TO QUESTIONS FROM THE SITC

Dear Dame Chi Onwurah and members of the SITC,

First of all, I'd like to express my profound appreciation for the work you have done in holding to account and further probing the issues that have led to significant cuts in the PPAN research undertaken within STFC. I read with interest the written response of Lord Vallance and Sir Ian Chapman to the committee's written questions, and I'd like to offer a few comments that highlight where the responses are somewhat at odds with what has transpired.

"STFC budget is flat across the spending review period, at £835m this year and ending on £842m in 2029/30. No decisions have been made yet about how that budget will be utilised for grant funded PPAN projects over that period..... To be explicit, no decisions have yet been taken on the funding committed to PPAN projects."

I'm afraid decisions have already been made, and hundreds of posts have already been lost. While the STFC budget is approximately flat across the spending review (SR) period, the allocated PPAN core-budget, which is approximately 1/3rd of the overall STFC budget, is not. The PPAN core-budget has already had significant cuts in the past 1-2 years, and this is before the additional cuts, estimated to be £40M in PPAN, are implemented before the end of the SR. In light of the previous cuts and foreseen cuts, decisions have already been taken. It is true that new funding decisions have not been made since the 2025-SR announcement; nevertheless, significant cuts to posts have already been implemented in at least the following areas:

- Accelerator projects (AWAKE, HL-LHC, H3Beams, EIC): 29 posts.
- Scoping/bridging posts in the two cancelled Infrastructure Projects (LHCb, EIC): 33 posts.
- LHC upgrade (ATLAS/CMS): 10 posts
- Experimental Particle Physics RAs: 29 posts
- Theoretical Particle Physics RAs: 39 posts
- Astronomy Posts (Large & Small Awards): 67 posts
- Quantum Technologies in Fundamental Physics (QTFP): 45 posts
- Gravitational Waves: 7 posts.

There are subtleties regarding what the baseline is, since some programmes received uplifts as a consequence of the 2022-SR allocations, which were later removed; but the underlying picture is clear: decisions made in the past year have already resulted in the loss of 220–260 posts depending on baseline assumptions. These are predominantly cuts to ECR RAs. Many of these ECRs, after a significant UK investment in their training, are now leaving the country where their skills will be used to benefit growth outside of the UK. There is also a loss of experienced engineers, with unique skills developed over many years, who will now not be available to train apprentices and the next generation of engineers. One area that is worth highlighting is QTFP: a cross-disciplinary programme between PPAN and EPSRC scientists to develop quantum technologies, i.e. precisely one of the stated areas of national priority and a key part of bucket-2. The ECRs who have been trained over several years in this priority area have now lost their jobs. It is already too late for them to be employed through potential funds in bucket-2 since no calls for bucket-2 have emerged. There appears to have been no impact assessment of this. The statement that "no decisions

have been made” is frankly insulting to the many people who have already had their positions discontinued, with significant ramifications to their personal lives. This loss of 220-260 posts is in direct contradiction to the statement:

“Across PPAN, UKRI typically funds a few hundred post-docs and we can reassure you that the current level of post-docs will be maintained across the SR. We are both clear that there will be no reduction in in PPAN post-doc numbers and that developing the next generation of talented researchers and innovators is one of the most important things that UKRI does.... We are committed to supporting ECRs going forward, and UKRI will continue to engage with this community directly to hear how best we can do so.”

It is clear that, irrespective of any ongoing consultations, there will be a further loss of ECR posts in the PPAN area.

[on Particle Physics Theory Grants] *“STFC did not meet the timeline for appropriate peer review, governance and quality assurance, resulting in the awards not being issued in time.”*

The peer review was done to the appropriate timeline and to the highest standards. Governance issues in STFC meant that the grants could not be issued in time.

“flexibility will be maximised, such that they can recruit out of cycle if they wish, and, that if they cannot use them within 2026, they will be able to take more post-docs in 2027.”

This I’m afraid completely misses the point. The scale of the cuts in theoretical particle physics (39 posts) is so large that many university groups no longer have a single RA. With the sums awarded to many groups the best they could do is hire a post-doc for a few weeks: nobody would take such a position when our competitors are offering 3-year RA positions. While it is also the case that missing a year in the cycle means that funds available for one 3-year position could in principle be used to fund 1.5 2-year positions, it remains difficult to hire 0.5 of a person.

“For context, there are typically ~20 particle physics theory post-doctoral researchers funded by UKRI each year. “

This unfortunately, is simply not true. The number funded each year, averaged over the last three grant rounds (2016, 2019, 2022), is 44. One might ask if such a misunderstanding can be achieved on a number that is simple to extract, then what levels of misunderstanding are being propagated through other numbers that are being quoted?

I should add that, as a community, PPAN scientists are very keen to be a part of the bucket-2 and national priority initiatives in AI, Quantum Technology, semiconductors, and nuclear power/net-zero; indeed, these areas have underpinned the science we have done over the past decade and more. At present, there are no calls in these areas, and we are concerned that over-prescriptive definitions of what research is eligible for such funding will restrict the engagement of PPAN scientists. For example, the QTFP programme would appear to be a natural fit for bucket-2, yet to date it is excluded. With PPAN scientists being part of bucket-2 and with some pragmatism and dialogue between PPAN scientists and UKRI, there should be a means to ameliorate much of the damage that has already been inflicted.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Lancaster' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Prof. Mark Lancaster FRS