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House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Select Committee

By e-mail

31st March 2026

Dear House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Select Committee,

Re: Drayson Partitions

I write from the Institute for Particle and Nuclear Physics at the University of Edinburgh. My letter is co-signed by 39 of my senior colleagues in the institute, listed at the end of this letter. I am alarmed by the letter from the Minister of State for Science, Innovation, Research, and Nuclear and the CEO of UKRI to the committee on 19th March, particularly in the presentation of the Drayson partitions, and wish to address this in the committee's written record.

In their letter, Lord Vallance and Prof Sir Ian Chapman write regarding the "thesis of the Drayson partitions policy" that "it is appropriate to tension the PPAN grants portfolio against [subscriptions for] large facilities, such as CERN or ESO". This is a fundamentally new interpretation of the partitions that goes against 17 years of long-standing consensus around science funding that has survived multiple different governments and parliaments.

How the Drayson partitions previously operated

The evidence for the previous approach is already in the public domain:

1. The STFC Delivery Plan 2016-2020[1] notes "Government established three budgetary partitions for STFC in 2010; these protect each area of our programme by avoiding the transfer of financial pressures from other areas. Government separately defines the budget of each partition, and so this Delivery Plan provides an overview of proposed activity within each." The document goes on to establish these three partitions as "International Subscriptions" (covering, for example, CERN), "UK National Facilities", and the "Core Programme" (including PPAN grants). The approach here is the exact opposite of that in Lord Vallance and Sir Ian's letter: PPAN grants are directly protected against international subscriptions.
2. More recently, in 2024 the then STFC Executive Chair and now CERN Director General Prof Mark Thomson presented to the European Committee for Future Accelerators[2] that STFC has "three partitions in … [the] core R&D budget":

[1] https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/STFC-220316-STFCDeliveryPlan2016to20-160510-1.pdf, also at https://www2.ph.ed.ac.uk/~wbarter/SITC/STFC-220316-STFCDeliveryPlan2016to20-160510-1.pdf. See Section 2 for the relevant information.

[2] https://indico.cern.ch/event/1348500/contributions/5676225/attachments/2944132/5173441/STFC_Intro-rECFA.pdf, also at https://www2.ph.ed.ac.uk/~wbarter/SITC/STFC_Intro-rECFA.pdf. See Slide 5 for the relevant information.

"International Facilities" (including CERN), "UK Facilities", and the "Core R&D Programme", with "[p]artitions…in place to ensure balance is maintained across the overall portfolio". This reflects the same understanding present in the 2016-2020 Delivery Plan and confirms that this approach to the Drayson partitions was actively maintained within STFC until very recently.

The situation is therefore:

(i) that Lord Vallance and UKRI have misunderstood the partitions; or
(ii) that STFC have misinterpreted these partitions for over a decade; or
(iii) that the partitions have recently been redefined without consulting the wider PPAN community.

Why this matters

This separation of international subscriptions and research grants in different partitions is not arbitrary, but a direct consequence of how they are set and the different roles that they play. First, the subscriptions are governed by international treaties, which are not under UKRI's control. Second, the subscriptions support the international research laboratory infrastructure, while the PPAN grants enable the UK to undertake research at these laboratories – and therefore benefit from them. If the two investments are not protected within different streams, then to make short-term savings when international subscriptions rise, deep and damaging cuts end up being made to grants. This then leads to both waste and a loss of academic and economic impact over the long-term with the UK losing the scientific capability necessary to exploit investment in our national and international facilities.

The above evidence confirms how STFC and the PPAN community have viewed the Drayson partitions as operating over the last 17 years. The stability in PPAN funding that the Drayson partitions put in place directly enabled the UK community to grow back from the 2008 crisis that occurred when STFC was set up. This stability has ensured that the PPAN community in the UK is internationally recognised for its research excellence and broader impact.

While respecting the government's democratic right to revisit the previous consensus, this is best done in an open and transparent way that accurately views the past and which considers the wider research and economic impact of proposed changes. In line with the Haldane principle, it is imperative that such reappraisals are carried out in broad consultation with the relevant scientific community, ensuring that any new consensus that emerges carries the support of the community and remains above and beyond party politics. Such an approach will provide long-term stability for the PPAN community, allowing us to continue delivering world-class research.

Yours sincerely,

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