UK Research and Innovation

[redacted]

20 August 2026

Dear [redacted]

Freedom of Information request: FOI2026/00526

Thank you for your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request received on the 22 June in which you requested the following:

Your request:

The minutes of the STFC Council meeting of 17 December 2025 were recently removed and an amended version replaced them, with a reference to the need to honour legal commitments (originally in item 3.1) removed.

Can you please supply all the emails and any other documents and correspondence relating to this decision?

Our response:

I can confirm that UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) does hold information relevant to your request.

The UKRI CEO and STFC Executive Chair agreed in March 2026 that the STFC Council meeting minutes of December 2025 should be amended to correct an inaccuracy and reflect policy position. STFC undertook a review of the minutes for all 2025 STFC council meetings, though the minutes were not removed at that stage. They were later removed in May 2026, when it was identified that the public versions contained information relating to employees, which should not have been published.

Minutes were republished on 18 June 2026 with relevant personal data removed and comments not being attributed to individuals. This reflected a wider move by STFC towards producing non-attributable summaries of Council discussions, rather than recording comments made by individual attendees. The minutes for December 2025 were also amended to address the statement that there was a "*major shift of funding from curiosity-driven research to priority areas and targeted programmes*" as this did not accurately reflect the STFC/UKRI position on funding for curiosity-driven research.

It was subsequently identified that this amendment had inadvertently omitted a reference to legal commitments being honoured. This reference was reinstated, and the minutes were amended further and reissued on 22 June 2026. A note was added to the STFC website regarding the accuracy of council minutes[1].

There is limited recorded information and correspondence relating to the review of the Council minutes, as much of the discussion happened in meetings and conversations where there are no notes for the record. Information held within scope of your request involves correspondence relating to the review and republication of the minutes of the December meeting of STFC's Council, and to the ongoing prioritisation exercise. These consist of:

- A query raised by Minister Vallance in March 2026 regarding the published minutes, communicated by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and discussed internally by UKRI and STFC staff.
- Internal discussions between UKRI and STFC staff, including their views and opinions.

[1] https://www.ukri.org/publications/stfc-council-meeting-minutes/#:~:text=Accuracy%20of%20council%20minutes

- Discussion between STFC Council members, including their views and opinions, and communications with UKRI and STFC staff.

The documents provided with this request are included in *"FOI2026_00526 - Annex 1_Redacted"*. Some of the information in scope is considered to be subject to exemptions under the FOIA and has been withheld from disclosure. The exemptions considered to apply are Section 36, the exemption relating to the effective conduct of public affairs, and Section 40(2), personal information.

Further information relating to the prioritisation exercise has been published by UKRI on our website[2] and through the *Explainer: STFC prioritisation outcomes 2026 to 2030*[3]. Information relating to funding allocations and budgets has also been published in the *Budget allocations for UK Research and Innovation Explainer*[4].

Exemptions considered to apply

Section 36 – Prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs

For Section 36, the opinion of UKRI's Chief Executive Officer (CEO), as UKRI's Qualified Person, was sought on engaging the exemption and the level of prejudice. The CEO's opinion was that Sections 36 (2)(b)(i) and (ii), and (c) were engaged.

- Section 36(2)(b)(i) is considered to apply where disclosure would, or would be likely to, inhibit the free and frank provision of advice

- Section 36(2)(b)(ii) is considered to apply where disclosure would, or would be likely to, inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation

- Section 36(2)(c) is also considered to apply where disclosure would otherwise prejudice, or would be likely otherwise to prejudice, the effective conduct of public affairs

As Section 36 is a qualified exemption, a test was required to determine whether the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs public interest in disclosure. The public interest test was conducted by a senior manager, who was not directly involved in the matters that were the subject of your request.

Public interest in favour of disclosure

- There is a clear public interest in demonstrating how UKRI manages governance issues as they arise.
- There is a requirement for UKRI to be open and transparent in its processes and the funding decisions that it makes.
- There is a considerable amount of public interest in the reprioritisation exercise and the related STFC discussions captured and communicated in published information, such as STFC Council minutes.

Public interest in favour of withholding the information

- it is important that UKRI has protected safe space for purposes of deliberation relating to internal discussions relating to governance issues, including those relating to and involving advisory bodies. This includes the safe space for approaches to be freely and frankly debated between junior and senior officials to effectively inform administrative decisions and actions.
- It is important that UKRI has protected safe space for purposes of deliberation involving advisory bodies, and for options to be freely and frankly debated to effectively inform decisions on prioritisation and funding plans. Without this protected safe space, there is a significant risk that strategic funding decisions would be substantially less well-informed and limited to the detriment of UKRI and the STFC prioritisation exercise.
- In each instance the disclosure of the information on approaches and options under consideration would have a 'chilling effect' on both the timeliness and candour of the discussions.

[2] https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/our-vision-and-strategy/updates-on-our-2026-strategy-and-budget/stfc-prioritisation-outcomes/
[3] https://www.ukri.org/publications/explainer-stfc-prioritisation-outcomes/explainer-stfc-prioritisation-outcomes-2026-to-2030/
[4] https://www.ukri.org/publications/explainer-ukri-budget-allocations/budget-allocations-for-uk-research-and-innovation/

- Where the discussions involve advisory bodies and addressed ongoing activities, including the prioritisation exercise, the ‘chilling effect’ would significantly increase the risk that funding decisions would be substantially less well-informed. Disclosure of ongoing discussions to finalise outcomes can cause a chilling effect on candid deliberation, inhibiting advisers and officials from expressing candid, exploratory, or controversial views. This is acute where options are still being developed, tested or rejected and where advice includes critique or speculation and where disclosure would reduce the candour necessary for robust policy development, leading to poorer-quality decisions.
- For both areas addressed by the information in scope those involved in providing advice and engaging in debates may become more guarded, risk averse, or self-censoring in future.
- A safe space to debate options fully and rigorously, free from immediate external pressure or misinterpretation is needed to address governance issues and for the development of policy and funding decisions. With an ongoing issue, positions can be fluid and not settled, disclosure risks premature external scrutiny before conclusions are reached.

Overall, UKRI considers that on this occasion the public interest is best served by maintaining the exemption, and therefore the relevant information has been withheld from disclosure.

Section 40 – personal information

The names, contact details and personal views and opinions of individuals are considered to be exempt from disclosure under section 40(2) of the FOIA. Disclosing this information would contravene the first Data Protection Principle as defined under Section 86 of the Data Protection Act 2018 and Article 5 of UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR).

Section 40(2) is an absolute exemption and does not require a public interest test.

Your rights

If you have any queries regarding our response please do let us know. If you are dissatisfied with the handling of your request, you have the right to ask for an internal review, explaining which elements of this decision you disagree with and why. Internal review requests should be submitted within 40 working days of the date of our response and should be addressed to:

Head of Information Governance
Email: foi@ukri.org

Please quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are still not content with the outcome of the internal review, you may apply to refer the matter to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the review procedure provided by UKRI. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: www.ico.org.uk.

If you wish to raise a complaint regarding the service you have received or the conduct of any UKRI staff in relation to your request, please see UKRI’s complaints procedure[5].

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]
Information Governance
Information Rights Team
UK Research and Innovation
foi@ukri.org | dataprotection@ukri.org

[5] https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/contact-us/make-a-complaint/#skipnav-target