[redacted]

13 August 2026

Dear [redacted]

Freedom of Information request: FOI2026/00486

Thank you for your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request received 5 June 2026, copied below.

Your request:

I would like to request a copy of the STFC Science Board prioritisation exercise report due to be presented to STFC Council on 9th June.

Our response:

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

The information within scope of your request comprises a paper to STFC's Council meeting in June 2026, on the outputs of the STFC Science Board PPAN (particle physics, astronomy and nuclear physics) prioritisation.

The paper and supporting annexes include detailed information on options and scenarios presented to STFC council for consideration, including impact assessments and risks, implications for specific investments and programmes and for international and intergovernmental partnerships. This information 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, Section 43 relating to commercial interests, and Section 40(2) relating to personal information.

Further information relating to the STFC prioritisation exercise has been published by UKRI on our website[1], which includes details of the implications for the PPAN projects funded by STFC. Information relating to funding allocations and budgets has also been published in the *Budget allocations for UK Research and Innovation Explainer*[2].

We have considered whether those parts of the papers that include summary information about the prioritisation exercise and the principles, and which aligns with other information publicly available, including that published by UKRI could be provided. However, as this comprises only a small part of the information and would add little context beyond that published elsewhere.

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.

[1] https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/our-vision-and-strategy/updates-on-our-2026-strategy-and-budget/stfc-prioritisation-outcomes/

[2] https://www.ukri.org/publications/explainer-ukri-budget-allocations/budget-allocations-for-uk-research-and-innovation/

- 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.

<u>Public interest in favour of disclosure</u>

- There is a general public interest in the disclosure of this information to support transparency and openness of a public organisation, and to demonstrate how UKRI has managed the comprehensive prioritisation exercise undertaken.

- There is a clear public interest in transparency to ensure the accountability of public organisations, and to provide further context to other information published by UKRI relating to the exercise, scenarios and options and other factors considered.

- It would be in the public interest to gain insight into the process which aims to place STFC on a more sustainable footing, protect critical national capability and ensure investment remains focused on areas where it can deliver the greatest long-term impact for researchers, businesses and the UK. Access to the STFC Council paper may enable the public, partners and other interested parties to independently assess the approach and impact of the exercise.

<u>Public interest in favour of withholding the information</u>

- UKRI's ability to protect the safe space for purposes of deliberation, stakeholder input and advice to support effective funding decisions is essential. This 'safe space' is required for purposes of deliberation and discussions with advisory bodies, and to enable councils and the executive to freely and frankly debate options for UKRI to make effective and informed decisions on prioritisation, partnerships, and future funding plans for specific investments and across disciplines. This is particularly important for ongoing exercises, where positions can be fluid and not settled, and where disclosure risks premature external scrutiny before conclusions are reached and communicated to all relevant parties.

- Disclosing information on options under current consideration, detailed scenarios and risks relating to an ongoing exercise would have a 'chilling effect' on both the timeliness and candour of the discussions on the ongoing process, and be detrimental to future stages of the exercise, or similar future exercises. Disclosure would undermine UKRI's ability to develop plans across disciplines, forecasting and allocations for portfolio areas, funding provisions for specific investments including where these address legal obligations and risks, and to debate the full range of options and possible courses of action.

- Throughout this exercise the discussions have required the synthesis of a great deal of information in order to inform deliberations and difficult tensioning decisions. This has required the advisory committees to deliberate options, test ideas without prejudice and external pressures. Without keeping such live issues undisclosed to allow free and frank discussion. Without this protected safe space, there is a significant risk that strategic funding decisions around the STFC programmes, investments, and national and international infrastructure would be substantially less well-informed, and that UKRI would not receive the best advice. This would also limit UKRI's ability to explore all options freely in order to choose the optimum path forward, which is crucial to the effective conduct of public affairs. This would be to the detriment of UKRI and the STFC prioritisation exercise, and hinder the effective operation of this process and to achieve options which represent the best value for money for the public.

- The prioritisation exercise remains live and the paper detailed the options presented for consideration, and includes detail on impact assessments, funding scenarios for portfolio areas and investments, legal obligations, information on forecasting and measures to secure required savings, risks, implications for specific investments and programmes, and for international and intergovernmental partnerships. Disclosure at the current time would impact on the ongoing exercise where a safe space is needed to conclude the current stage, and to communicate decisions and support continuing deliberations free from external pressures and without compromising planned sector/community engagement, and partnership negotiations, including international partnerships and international activities.

- The paper captures the considerations presented at a fixed point, within an ongoing and fluid exercise subject to further debate and formal approvals, at the meeting in question and subsequently. Implementation is expected to run to March 2029, with options not being taken forward remaining in play as potential fallback savings until this time, or until fully dismissed. As a result disclosure at this time may mislead stakeholders and the public, causing unnecessary concern, prejudicing the effective conduct of public affairs.

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 43 – Commercial interests

Section 43(2) of the FOIA, the exemption relating to commercial interest is also considered to apply. This exemption is applied where disclosure would likely result in a person's (an individual, a company, the public authority itself or any other legal entities) commercial interests being prejudiced. This is a qualified exemption, and a test was carried out to determine whether the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs public interest in disclosure.

<u>Public interest in favour of disclosure:</u>

- There is a general public interest in the disclosure of this information to support transparency and openness of a public organisation, and to demonstrate how UKRI has managed the comprehensive prioritisation exercise undertaken.

- There is a clear public interest in transparency to ensure the accountability of public organisations, and to provide further context to other information published by UKRI relating to the exercise, scenarios and options and other factors considered.

- It would be in the public interest to gain insight into the process which aims to place STFC on a more sustainable footing, protect critical national capability and ensure investment remains focused on areas where it can deliver the greatest long-term impact for researchers, businesses and the UK. Access to the STFC Council paper may enable the public, partners and other interested parties to independently assess the approach and impact of the exercise.

<u>Public interest in favour of withholding the information</u>

- The paper to STFC Council outlines options and scenarios for consideration, including impact assessments and risks, implications for specific investments and programmes and for international and intergovernmental partnerships. Disclosure at the present time would be detrimental to the interests of UKRI, by jeopardising the ongoing exercise and the disclosure of incomplete information relating to options and scenarios for specific investments outlined that were not final or contextualised. Disclosure could damage specific investments, facilities and partnerships, and impact stakeholder confidence in a way that is disproportionate or misleading.

- For programmes and investments supported in partnership with other bodies, in the UK and internationally, disclosure could adversely affect relationships with other funders, partners and collaborators, which may result in risks to the continuation of partnership funding, the level of support or impact UKRI’s position in partnership negotiations.

- Where the information directly relates to STFC facilities, collaborations and partnerships, in addition to the points above, disclosure would be detrimental to current commercial activities, including services provided by STFC and access to facilities.

- We also considered the impact on UKRI if commercially sensitive information relating to bodies we engage and work closely with were disclosed. We believe it would damage the trust in UKRI and likely impact our ability to carry out our role and manage our current and future investments.

As discussed above the paper captures the considerations presented at a fixed point, within an ongoing and fluid exercise subject to further debate and formal approvals, including at the meeting in question and subsequently.

Taking these issues into consideration, it was concluded that the commercial sensitivity arguments outweigh the public interest in disclosure at this time. This takes account of information published by UKRI relating to financial allocations, such as the budget explainer and about the ongoing prioritisation exercise.

Section 40 – Personal information

The names of individuals identified within the papers are considered to be personal information and as 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).

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[3].

Yours sincerely,

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

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