

Graham Stringer MP
Blackley and
Broughton
House of Commons
London

Constituency Office
North Manchester Sixth Form College
Rochdale Road
Harpurhey
Manchester M9 4AF
Tel: ~~0161 275 6666~~
Fax: ~~0161 275 6666~~

Ref: PH/STRI01001/01100734
Date: 14 February 2011

Glenn McKee
Clerk of Committee
Science and Technology Committee
Committee Office
7 Millbank
London
SW1P 3JA

Glenn

While I was in Geneva, Professor Hall gave me copies of the enclosed letters which he wanted to be considered as part of evidence into the inquiry into Astronomy and Particle Physics.

Yours sincerely

Graham Stringer MP

Imperial College
London

Blackett Laboratory (Physics Department)
Imperial College London SW7 2AZ

South Kensington campus,
Tel: +44 (0)20 7594 7800 Fax: +44 (0)20 7823 8630

g.hall@imperial.ac.uk
www.imperial.ac.uk/research/hcp

12 October 2010

G. Hall Ph.D

Professor of Physics

Professor David Delpy
Chief Executive Officer, EPSRC
The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council,
Polaris House,
North Star Avenue,
Swindon SN2 1ET

Dear Prof Delpy

I am writing to you as a PI and budget holder for the UK part of the CMS experiment, at the CERN Large Hadron Collider, which is funded by STFC. The budgets held centrally at RAL for which I am responsible amount this year to about £1.7M, of which about £0.5M is spent on travel and operations in CERN. This is in addition to substantial grants held in universities. We are heavily dependent on the successful operation of the new Shared Service Centre for payments of travel expenditure and experiment operation costs in CERN, as well as engineering and physicist staff salaries in Rutherford Appleton Laboratory. I am required to monitor, approve and make forecasts of outturns during the year, to ensure funds are spent correctly and to help global optimisation of STFC budgets, by ensuring over- or under-spends are anticipated.

As I am sure you are aware, since the beginning of this financial year, my task has been almost impossible after responsibility for invoicing, payments and reporting was passed to the SSC. The information is inadequate. Direct online access to account records is impossible for those outside the Research Councils. Invoices and payments are late, erroneous or even non-existent. There is confusion and lack of information in arranging or tracking transactions. Travellers are being paid, if at all, many months in arrears, forcing many individuals to bear credit card or bank costs of thousands of pounds. The system is functioning far worse than its predecessor and, from what I can tell, is not improving. What little information has been made available about online access to accounts suggests the system will, even when – or if – complete, provide a worse service than what existed before.

It also appears that whoever designed SSC never considered the possibility that it might be used for tasks managed by university staff. This is astonishing. From what we have managed to glean from SSC, this oversight will probably not be rectified.

I have also read in the media about many other "teething" problems affecting SSC and I am extremely conscious of the heavy additional administrative load being borne by STFC and RAL staff in attempting to help us through these difficult times. The fact that scientists, as well as administrative staff, are contributing significantly to this massive effort means that implementation of the SSC is generating costs, not savings.

In parenthesis, I would like to draw your attention to the CERN EDH and CET systems which provide information of the kind budget-holders need on a 24 hour basis, via web access from any computer running any browser in, as far as I know, a completely secure way. It is highly reliable and easy to use. It serves an enormous community of CERN users. It was

also introduced smoothly with almost no visible effect on users as it has been changed, upgraded and maintained. This, apparently, is beyond the abilities of the developers of the SSC system.

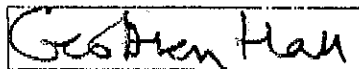
It is hard to convey how angry I am about the SSC and its performance and costs. With a background of increasingly difficult economic times, as well as an obvious need to be efficient and responsible in managing science expenditure, the introduction of the SSC has made the task of PIs such as myself effectively impossible.

I would like to ask you to answer a few questions:

- who was responsible for initiating and planning the SSC and why did they get it so badly wrong?
- who is now responsible for the SSC?
- who will be held accountable for the mess created by the introduction of the SSC?
- how will we be compensated for the losses, for example in wasted scientific staff time and extra administrative loads, caused by the SSC?
- when will the system be brought to a tolerable level of operation?
- what plans are there to make the system securely accessible to non-Research Council staff?
- what was the budget for the SSC project and how much is it overspent?
- how much more will it cost to reach its objectives?
- will it then provide an adequate service, comparable with systems in use elsewhere, such as CERN?

I look forward to your answers.

Yours sincerely,



Prof Geoff Hall
UK Spokesperson, CMS experiment

Professor David Delpy (X5 Engineering & Medical)
Chief Executive

Professor Geoff Hall
Blackett Laboratory (Physics Department)
Imperial College
London
SW7 2AZ

Polaris House
North Star Avenue
Swindon SN2 1E1
Telephone: (01793) 444429
Local Fax: (01793) 444707
e-mail: david.delpy@rcuk.ac.uk
www.rcuk.ac.uk

22 October 2010

Ref: 3757

Dear Professor Hall

Thank you for your letter dated 12th October and for taking the time to share your frustrations with me.

The project to set up the Shared Services Centre, which was conceived and is managed jointly by all seven Research Councils, has been a hugely complex and demanding project. The project is on target to cost £135million. RCUK SSC Ltd is a separate legal entity (*RCUK Shared Services Centre Limited*), jointly owned by the Research Councils. Despite some challenges which we have had to overcome, some of which we are still working with all parties to resolve, RCUK SSC Ltd is currently delivering services to more than 17,000 people and dealing with transactions from around 20,000 suppliers. From procurement activities alone the SSC are on target to achieve savings of £25m this financial year and these savings are being reinvested into the core business of the Research Councils in supporting excellent research.

One of these issues has been the lack of management information as you describe in your letter. I can understand your frustrations at not being able to monitor, forecast or accurately manage your budget or produce the required outturns and information for CERN. We have been working hard to provide a solution to this. A new tool, which will allow accurate reporting, has been launched this week and is in the process of being rolled out. I hope that this will go some way to solving some of the problems that you outlined in your letter.

External access is another area where we will be looking to introduce improvements. The current restrictions on online access are down to IT security issues which RCUK SSC Ltd has been, quite rightly, approaching cautiously. It is the intention to enable direct external access in time but I am afraid I can not, at this point, give clear timescales for when that will happen.

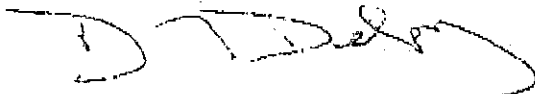
With regard to expenses payments, there have also been issues in receiving timely payment and I agree that it is unacceptable for individuals to have to bear the brunt of this. Again, the Research Councils are working closely with RCUK SSC Ltd in order to improve



the processes and resolve the issues. I have asked that the claims issue that you have raised is investigated and this will be done jointly by RCUK SSC Ltd and STFC.

In light of your letter, I have also asked STFC to liaise with you to consider whether enough is being done to communicate about the Shared Services Centre with external users, such as yourself. We do take complaints such as yours seriously and in order to continue to improve the situation we would like to work with you to get things right.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Delpy', written over a faint horizontal line.

David Delpy

Imperial College
London

Blackett Laboratory (Physics Department)
Imperial College London SW7 2AZ

South Kensington campus,
Tel: +44 (0)20 7594 7800 Fax: +44 (0)20 7823 8830

g.hall@imperial.ac.uk
www.imperial.ac.uk/research/hep

18 January 2011

G. Hall Ph.D

Professor of Physics

Professor David Delpy
Chief Executive Officer, EPSRC
The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council,
Polaris House,
North Star Avenue,
Swindon SN2 1ET

Dear Prof Delpy

Thank you for your letter of 22 October in reply to my letter to you of 12 October last year regarding the Shared Services Centre. I noticed that you did not really answer the several direct questions which I posed. However I decided to delay writing to you again to see what progress would materialise. After three months I can see a little, but certainly not enough to raise the SSC performance to the level which I believe is required. Also I have severe doubts about the financial savings which you believe have, or will be, achieved, partly as a result of the extra work which has been needed to make SSC information available in a useful form.

As I explained I am PI, and therefore financially responsible, for a large STFC experimental project, CMS. As such, I require information from the SSC which allows me to monitor spending at several levels, right down to individual transactions. At present many of these transactions involve expenditure in CERN or travel expenses for staff visits to and from CERN, or within the UK, including apartment costs and related expenses for those staff who are based in CERN.

I am now able to access directly in a secure way the SSC Oracle database, thanks to help provided by STFC colleagues in RAL. I have found that the information in the database is hardly organised in an intuitive or user-friendly way and at present it is more or less completely useless to me. It is significantly inferior to the information to which I had access using the old FRS system available until April 2010, which was not thought to be state of the art. You will recall that I made comparisons with systems available in CERN which are easy to access, very well organized and provide clear, detailed information.

With significant effort on the part of STFC staff I am provided with digested financial summaries extracted from the SSC database. These provide me with some information, but naturally after quite a delay and at a far inferior level to what I received from FRS, to which I had direct access and in which I was easily able to drill down to individual transactions so that I could check them in detail.

This is no longer possible and any queries (there are many!) must be passed to STFC staff to resolve. Since the SSC data appear to be incomplete, obscure or often erroneous, this is highly inefficient and time consuming. It is very wasteful of STFC staff time.

I also mentioned in my last letter the repayment of travel expenses. This has improved to the extent that typical delays in repayments are about 3-4 weeks, which is worse than was the case until last April. However there are still a worrying number of repayments which are overdue, some dating back many months, and errors are still occurring in directing some of them to correct addresses or bank accounts. Paper confirmation of payments (not yet, I

notice, electronic) is intermittent and erratic, as I know from my own experience, yet this is essential to the individuals concerned. To identify problems relies on careful personal record keeping and those individuals affected alerting us when payments are not received as expected. This is often subject to delay since most of us are not at all sure what is going on in SSC and how soon to raise queries. The only means to resolve these problems is to request assistance from STFC staff who can intervene with SSC.

Payments of invoices to CERN are now very late, delayed by months, and many have been erroneous. This is in great contrast to the situation pre-April 2010 where STFC had an excellent record of prompt and accurate payments. Fortunately our past record gave rise to some patience from the CERN Finance department, but such tolerance cannot be relied on indefinitely.

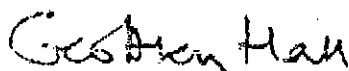
There are other examples I could cite, for example of unexpected difficulties and significant delays in arranging transfer of CMS funds from STFC to universities. One case has been ongoing since at least August last year and is still incomplete.

I hope I have made clear that, from a user perspective, the SSC is very unsatisfactory. It has not improved much over the period I have observed and is still causing immense problems and loss of valuable staff time, some of which is being diverted from scientific work.

As a consequence, I find it difficult to understand how the savings you claim the SSC has already provided, or will be providing in future, are achieved and I have seen no evidence for them in the areas of STFC business which concern me. I would be most interested to see real examples of how these benefits will be realized, and their value.

Meanwhile, there is evidently much to be done before the SSC offers a service comparable to that which was already available until April 2010. I am sure the defects in the SSC have had a severe impact on STFC business in the present financial year, if what I have experienced is typical, which I believe is probable. I hope you will be able to tell me when and how the SSC service will attain the required level and that it will adapt to the needs of users such as myself, as well as those who perhaps have other objectives in mind.

Yours sincerely,



Prof Geoff Hall
UK Spokesperson, CMS experiment

suffers financial loss due to broadband paid late