



August 7th, 2026

To:

Professor Michele Dougherty, Executive Chair, STFC
Sir Ian Chapman, Chief Executive, UKRI
Chris McDonald MP, Minister of State (Minister for Science, Innovation and Investment)
Jonathan Reynolds MP, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade
Simon Garrington, e-MERLIN/VLBI National Facility Director

Dear colleagues

We are writing collectively as the leaders of radio astronomy observatories and institutes across Europe, which collaborate with e-MERLIN and Jodrell Bank through the European VLBI Network (EVN).

Jodrell Bank was one of the founding members of the EVN, having pioneered the technology of connecting telescopes over long distances and demonstrated the revolutionary scientific discoveries enabled by combining radio telescopes into an instrument with an effective diameter of hundreds or thousands of kilometres.

The EVN has grown to become the world's largest and most powerful radio interferometric network operating at centimetre wavelengths—a triumph of international cooperation and openness. It enables thousands of astronomers across Europe and around the world to make ground-breaking discoveries with a truly unique instrument. In recent years, e-MERLIN has become fully integrated into the EVN, further strengthening its scientific capabilities, while the 76-m Lovell Telescope remains the network's second-largest antenna.

The UK can be truly proud of its central role in the EVN, not only by virtue of its physical assets—the Lovell Telescope and e-MERLIN—but also because of the technical and scientific leadership and contributions it has demonstrated over many decades. Jodrell Bank's international standing and its historic contribution to global radio astronomy were important reasons for locating the SKAO Global Headquarters there. This creates a uniquely powerful concentration of scientific expertise, technological capability and international leadership.

Technical highlights include the prominent UK role in pioneering real-time VLBI, while scientific highlights include the recent discovery, through global VLBI observations correlated at JIVE-ERIC (Joint Institute for VLBI ERIC), of a dark matter object of approximately one million solar masses, which is challenging existing models of structure formation and the evolution of the Universe.

The news that e-MERLIN and the Jodrell Bank telescopes, including the 76-m Lovell Telescope, will no longer be able to participate in the EVN from 2028 is both alarming and bewildering. We are aware of statements by UKRI that the Lovell Telescope is operated by the University of Manchester, but its participation in the EVN and global VLBI has always been funded by STFC through its support for e-MERLIN. The loss of the Lovell Telescope and the other e-MERLIN antennas would cause significant and potentially irreversible damage to the EVN, while also having a long-lasting impact on the UK's collaboration with European and global partners in radio astronomy.

The proposed cuts would also put at risk the specialist scientific and engineering expertise developed at Jodrell Bank over many decades. Maintaining this critical national competence is essential not only for participation in the EVN and future SKA-VLBI activities, but also for enabling UK technological and industrial returns from the SKAO and other major international projects. Once dispersed, such expertise would be extremely difficult and costly to rebuild.

It appears to us that there has been a failure to recognise the essential role that European radio telescopes will play in extending SKA-Mid, currently under construction in South Africa, into a global, intercontinental array. The original vision that the SKAO would develop its own long-distance array of thousands of dishes across Africa has long since changed. SKA-MID will become operational in the mid 2030s with around 140 dishes, with a maximum span of 35 km. The only way in which the SKA can carry out experiments requiring the extremely high angular resolution sought by many scientists will be to link it with antennas in Europe and elsewhere.

Without such intercontinental baselines—and without the intermediate-baseline coverage supplied by e-MERLIN—the SKA would be unable to achieve, at centimetre wavelengths, the combination of angular resolution, sensitivity and image fidelity required to complement the next generation of 30–40-m-class optical and infrared telescopes. This complementarity will be essential for addressing many of the leading scientific questions of the coming decades.

The UK could contribute not only the second-largest antenna in this global array; through e-MERLIN, it could also make the array much more resilient and scientifically capable by providing key intermediate antenna spacings of hundreds of kilometres. It could do so for a tiny fraction of the UK's contribution to the SKAO, while remaining at the heart of a European collaboration that has remained strong for decades. **The alternative would be to lose both a pioneering national capability and an essential component of the future global radio astronomy system just as the SKA era begins.**

Some of us are deeply involved in the SKAO endeavour at the highest level. We firmly believe that we need both the SKAO and strong national capabilities such as e-MERLIN and Jodrell Bank for the future of astronomy. They are genuinely complementary in every sense: scientifically, strategically and culturally. **Continued partnership between e-MERLIN, the EVN and the SKAO would maximise the scientific return on the UK's substantial investment in the SKAO and help secure its leadership in global radio astronomy.**

Jodrell Bank has recently pioneered the application of radio astronomy assets and expertise in strategically important areas, including space situational awareness and space security. Several of us are pursuing similar initiatives in our own countries with increasing urgency, and we aim to work together in the near future. These applications demonstrate the broader strategic value of maintaining strong national facilities and specialist expertise. Such activities

cannot readily be undertaken through the SKAO because of its international governance structure and exclusively scientific mission.

UKRI has stated that it continues to invest in Jodrell Bank through the SKAO. In our view, meaningful and strategically coherent investment would also enable Jodrell Bank and e-MERLIN to become an integral part of the global radio astronomy array of the twenty-first century. **We therefore urge UKRI, STFC and the UK Government to work with the University of Manchester and international partners to identify a sustainable solution that will preserve the participation of the Lovell Telescope and e-MERLIN in the EVN and future global VLBI observations. Such a solution would protect a unique UK capability, honour long-standing international commitments and maximise the scientific, technological and strategic return from the UK's investment in the SKAO.**

Yours sincerely,

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