

**Open Letter To:**

**14 August 2026**

**The Rt Hon Jonathan Reynolds MP**

Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade

**Chris McDonald MP**

Minister of State, Department of Business, Innovation, Science and Trade

**Cc: Professor Michele Dougherty**

Executive Chair, Science and Technology Facilities Council

**Professor Sir Ian Chapman**

Chief Executive, UK Research and Innovation

**Professor Simon Garrington**

Director of e-MERLIN, University of Manchester, UK

**The e-MERLIN Steering Committee objection to the proposed closure of e-MERLIN**

We write as the e-MERLIN Steering Committee to object strongly to STFC's decision to de-prioritise and withdraw funding from e-MERLIN, the UK national radio astronomy facility. We are an independent body of experts from academia and industry with both UK and international members, appointed by STFC to oversee the national facility and advise on its operations and plans. As such, we have a unique insight into the operation and scientific productivity of the facility, formed over a long period. We were not consulted over the recent prioritisation exercise.

e-MERLIN is a unique facility which is extremely scientifically productive. It is used by astronomers from around the world under the highly successful Open Skies policy, in which national facilities are made available to the world solely on the basis of scientific merit. No other radio telescope, existing or planned, has its combination of high resolution, imaging quality, sensitivity and frequency coverage. There is no other facility to which the users who depend on these capabilities can migrate.

The Square Kilometre Array (SKA) will not be available until the mid 2030s and is optimised for quite different science goals. Because e-MERLIN spans 220km compared to 40km for SKA, it produces images that are five times sharper than will be possible with SKA. e-MERLIN images are comparable in detail to the optical and infra-red images from the Hubble and James Webb Space Telescopes. This level of detail is essential for UK-led science including understanding the formation of planets like our own. The closure of e-MERLIN will result in research programmes in the UK and around the world having to be abandoned. The UK will be imposing this outcome on the international community, on whom we rely for reciprocal access to other world-leading facilities under Open Skies.

We should also make it clear that the operations of all scientific facilities at Jodrell Bank depend on the e-MERLIN funding, and the loss of staff and technical expertise that would result from its closure would also condemn the Lovell Telescope and most, if not all, other research activities on the site. Closure of e-MERLIN would require the permanent dismantling of the antennas and disposal of other infrastructure, and the dispersal of the expert teams which operate, maintain, and upgrade it. Reversing this would take decades and hundreds of millions of pounds.

The long-term plans for e-MERLIN are to maintain and enhance its capabilities using many of the technology developments which STFC has extensively funded for application in the SKA. The unique infrastructure has been built up over many decades, and its technical capability rests on electronics and computing that has been continually upgraded to maintain state-of-the-art performance. Indeed, e-MERLIN is just coming to the end of a successful major technology upgrade programme which has been funded and supported by STFC over the past decade. This would come to fruition just as funding for the facility is removed. In combination with the European VLBI Network, of which e-MERLIN is an essential part, e-MERLIN would provide a unique and complementary facility to the SKA through the 2030s and 2040s, providing the UK and the international community with ultra-high resolution and sensitivity capability to match the SKA's survey capability. This would also provide the UK with a base for maintaining and developing national capability in all the engineering, technical and scientific skills necessary to play a long-term role in the international radio astronomy community, particularly the SKA.

It is not credible that a country without a national radio astronomy programme can continue to be a key player in the SKA in the long term. STFC's position that 'funding SKA is enough' is in stark contrast to the other member countries which are investing heavily in their domestic programmes. Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, Australia, Canada, China, India, South Africa and Japan all have major national facilities which will be centres of technology development, training, and science exploitation, and will enable them to make the most of their investments in SKA. The UK's current leading position in the SKA is due to our long history in radio astronomy at Jodrell and elsewhere. The SKAO explicitly highlights e-MERLIN both as a pathfinder instrument and one that will add essential complementarity when SKA is operating. With no national programme going forward, we are very likely to be in a position of funding a large fraction of the SKA without reaping the scientific and technical rewards, which will go elsewhere.

We also note that this funding decision comes just as leading UK radio astronomers at the Jodrell Bank Observatory demonstrate the array's ability to provide a powerful state-of-the-art capability for Space Situational Awareness, complementary to the optical systems which the UK is now heavily investing in. We on the steering committee have seen how the team pro-actively developed this application. This would be impossible without the e-MERLIN array, building on hardware and

intellectual property they have developed over decades for the UK science and space community.

We are concerned about the process which has led to these decisions. We were informed that the PPAN prioritisation would be announced in autumn 2026, but the announcement has been rushed, without the courtesy to provide the steering committee with any context to allow it to discharge its duties. The consultation asked the Facility for analysis of funding cuts, but not complete closure. The fact that STFC has been funding upgrades to e-MERLIN up to this point also implies a lack of strategic planning. Further, we are not aware of any consideration having been given to the impact of closing e-MERLIN on the UK's ability to exploit its significant investment in SKA.

The undersigned urge Ministers to urgently review this funding decision and work with the Facility to enable a pragmatic way forward that:

- Continues to deliver international world-leading science with a unique astronomical instrument
- Develops world-class scientists and technicians who deliver science and innovation for the UK
- Balances the UK investment between international and national facilities to maximise the benefit to the UK as a whole
- Provides unique and sovereign space situational awareness capabilities in an uncertain world

Simply deprioritising the UK's National Facility for Radio Astronomy and ending funding in 2028 is not a viable or responsible option. For less than 1% annually of the UK investment in SKA, the facility can be maintained and developed as a sovereign capability. In common with the British people we want radio astronomy science and a sovereign SSA capability, not a radio astronomy monument.

Yours Sincerely,

### **Members of the UK National Facility for Radio Astronomy Steering Committee**

Dr Stewart Eyres, Wrexham University, UK and Chair

Professor Angela Taylor, University of Oxford, UK

Professor James O. Chibueze, University of South Africa, South Africa

Dr Katherine Johnston, Lincoln University, UK

Professor Jane Greaves, Cardiff University, UK

Professor Anna Bartkiewicz, Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu, Poland

Dr Danielle Fenech, Square Kilometre Array Observatory

Mr Chris Dorn, Inverse Quanta Ltd., UK

Mr Simon Agass, Aiion Aerospace, UK