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House of Commons Select Committee Report on PPARC - comments by the Royal Society

1. The Council of the Royal Society has noted with interest the recent Select Committee report on the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council. The report has some valuable conclusions and recommendations concerning PPARC itself, but we would here like to emphasise points that have a wider bearing on policy for science.

2. We agree wholeheartedly with the Select Committee's view that 'withdrawal from fundamental research would, in effect, terminate the United Kingdom's claims to be among the most advanced nations of the world'. As we argued in our 1992 report *The future of the Science Base*, and on other occasions, 'the primary purpose of scientific research is the pursuit of knowledge in its own right, in the well-founded expectation that knowledge brings rewards.... A desire for knowledge is fundamental to human existence.'

3. We endorse, too, the view that fundamental research can hold powerful attractions to those considering their career options, and catches the attention of many who subsequently move to scientific work of great practical value.

4. The Select Committee very rightly emphasizes the importance of international collaboration in scientific research. This is self-evident in experiments of the scale associated with CERN or the Hubble Telescope. It is equally important in other, less expensive, areas. The key mode of international collaboration involves two scientists recognising a mutual interest through, for example, a common acquaintance, the international literature or an international conference, and agreeing to some form of collaboration appropriate to their circumstances. What is needed is rapid and flexible access to the modest resources for such recognition to occur. This is the prerequisite for the UK to be able to participate in global science and enjoy exposure to the 95% of the world's science that is done outside the UK.

5. All Research Councils subscribe to international organisations or collaborations, nearly always in a currency other than Sterling. We agree with the Select Committee that such expenditure should be judged against alternative ways of using the money, and therefore should come from the Councils' own budgets. We also agree that major fluctuations in subscriptions, caused by exchange shifts that have nothing to do with changes in the value of the science, can seriously impede rational management of the Science Budget. HM Treasury must acknowledge some responsibility for addressing this issue and, with OST, find a solution that ensures value for money from the Science Budget and enables the UK to be a reliable partner in international collaboration. The current situation damages both the Science Base and the UK's reputation with its international partners.