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South Cambridgeshire District Council

The Rt Hon Jonathan Reynolds MP
Secretary of State for Business, Innovation,
Science and Trade
By email only

Executive
Contact: Cllr Bridget Smith
Email: Cllr.Smith@scambs.gov.uk
10 November 2026

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: Protecting National Scientific Capability and the e-MERLIN Radio Telescope at the Mullard Radio Astronomy Observatory

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to you on behalf of South Cambridgeshire District Council to express our deep concern following the announcement by the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) regarding severe funding cuts to astronomy research, including the proposed 100% funding withdrawal for e-MERLIN.

We are proud to host the Mullard Radio Astronomy Observatory in South Cambridgeshire. In addition to telescopes and experiments operated by the University of Cambridge, this site also hosts the larger 32-m radio telescope owned and operated by the University of Manchester as a key element of their e-MERLIN network. Linked with six other telescopes across England and operated by Jodrell Bank Observatory at the University of Manchester, e-MERLIN forms a single world-class scientific instrument. Its 200 km separation provides the array's longest baseline and highest angular resolution, delivering a resolving capability comparable to the Hubble Space Telescope and the James Webb Space Telescope.

This facility is far more than a local asset. It is a vital part of our national and international astronomic capability. It underpins more than 1,000 peer-reviewed scientific papers and serves thousands of researchers internationally.

South Cambridgeshire District Council has long recognised the international importance of the work carried out at the Mullard Observatory.

Both our current Local Plan and our emerging joint Local Plan with Cambridge City Council contain explicit policies designed to safeguard and support the scientific operations conducted there. South Cambridgeshire residents are rightly proud of our district's role in global scientific innovation, and there is widespread concern across our community at the prospect of losing such a fundamental scientific resource.

Beyond its scientific achievements, e-MERLIN contributes significantly to the wider research, innovation and economic ecosystem including recent innovation in quantum computing that has made Greater Cambridge one of Europe's leading science and technology clusters. The presence of world-leading scientific infrastructure helps attract investment, supports high-skilled employment and reinforces the United Kingdom's reputation as a destination for cutting-edge research and innovation.

The facility also plays an important role in developing the next generation of scientists, engineers and technical specialists. Through its research programmes and international collaborations, e-MERLIN helps sustain the highly skilled workforce on which the UK's future economic competitiveness depends.

Withdrawing operational funding beyond March 2028 without a viable alternative roadmap presents an existential threat to e-MERLIN observations and risks rendering the Cambridge Telescope defunct. Once capabilities of this nature are lost, the specialist expertise, technical knowledge and international partnerships that support them will be extremely difficult to rebuild. The consequences would therefore extend far beyond the closure of a single facility, resulting in a lasting loss of national scientific capability and will most certainly impact negatively on the future success of the Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor.

At a time when the Government is rightly seeking to position the United Kingdom as a global science superpower and drive economic growth through research, innovation and technology, the proposed withdrawal of support from a globally significant research instrument appears fundamentally at odds with those ambitions.

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It risks sending an unfortunate signal to researchers, investors and international partners about Britain's commitment to the Oxford to Cambridge Science supercluster and to maintaining world-leading scientific infrastructure.

I strongly urge you and your department to review this decision, work alongside UKRI and STFC to explore alternative funding solutions and ensure that the future of e-MERLIN and the Cambridge telescope at the Mullard Radio Astronomy Observatory is secured for generations to come.

Specifically, I urge you to engage directly with UKRI and STFC to ensure that a sustainable long-term funding solution is identified before existing arrangements expire in March 2028. At the very least, any final decision should be paused pending a full assessment of the scientific, economic and strategic implications of withdrawing support from this nationally significant facility.

I am copying this letter to our local MPs, Pippa Heylings, Ian Sollom and Charlotte Cane, as well as to Victoria Collins MP, who is the Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Yours sincerely,

Bridget Smith

Cllr Bridget Smith
Leader of South Cambridgeshire District Council