Europe faces up to its future in space

Space science received more funds last week when ministers met in Rome. Now Britain must decide who will pay the bill

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Inspired perhaps by the Roman sunshine, Europe has given a new sign last week to space science. At a meeting, organised by the European Space Agency (ESA) in Rome, ministers from the agency's 11 member states agreed to increase the amount they spend on science. The increased budget, to which countries must contribute, is to be decided. The money could even come from the DTI, SERC, however, awaits a ministerial decision.

Professor Mark Richmond, vice chancellor of Manchester University, chaired a meeting last year to look at SERC's spending on space science. The council is still considering the report. It is, Richmond says that in times of financial stringency, John Kendrew will report its views on Britain's particle-physics work and its involvement in the European laboratory, CERN. One of the committee's terms of reference is to consider the reallocation of resources released to other areas of science if less money is spent on particle physics.

The government departments that are talking about where to find ESA's science budget are also working out the details of Britain's new space agency. Industry and academics have long lobbied for such an agency to formulate Britain's space policy.

Pattie announced the formation of the centre on the day he flew out to Rome. Details about funding and the centre's role will not be known for three months. In his opening address to the ministerial meeting, Pattie noted the announcement to convince his colleagues of Britain's commitment to space. After the meeting, Pattie admitted: "In Britain, there has been a political commitment to space compatible with that shown by industry." But, with the formation of the space agency and the mention of Hotol, Britain emerged from the meeting with a higher profile in space matters than it had at the beginning.