

Feedback from the RAL Tier-1 Review, December 14th 2010

1. The panel noted that the communications between the LHC experiments and RAL appeared to be working well and that the Tier-1 was now better integrated with the UK dTeam.
2. The panel complements RAL on the effective development of an out-of-hours service and its harmonization with operational procedures during normal hours.
3. The panel was encouraged by the excellent performance of RAL during the STEP09 exercise and early data, and felt that the priorities of (a) safeguarding custodial data and (b) providing a continuous service, were understood.
4. The panel notes the many of the 2009 problems at RAL were related to the new building R89. The panel urges STFC to note that this design-and-build approach failed to produce a building on time or with the expected specifications. To make this type of approach work, a much more effective oversight of the project is required by, on behalf of, STFC. The panel encourages the Tier-1 to review the new building to ensure that there are no other obvious problems waiting to happen. This might include the BMS system; the routing of services and networks; the power provision (including generator); and any other design features that have not yet been verified.
5. The panel noted a significant number of occasions when the unavailability of key staff members was mentioned. In order to increase agility, the Tier-1 is encouraged to actively broaden the expertise of staff, perhaps with rotation between teams or shadowing roles. It may be informative to tabulate the availability of key staff to ensure that other demands on their time are understood and appropriate.
6. The panel commended the efforts over the last year to formalize many areas of management and process control. The panel encourages fine-tuning of the correct balance between Control, Communications, and Culture. "Control" alludes to the formal management processes, which on their own would provide a rigid and unresponsive system run according to rules. To achieve success, control must be balanced by good and appropriate "Communication" and a "Culture" that leads people to make decisions based on a good understanding of what is important and how they should proceed even without the formal Control.
7. Concern was expressed by the external reviewers at the reluctance to upgrade CASTOR to 2.1.8, given the operational state of 2.1.9 at CERN. RAL were urged to be "risk-aware" rather than "risk-averse" in this, and other matters. The internal reviewers understood the caution at RAL but felt that it should now be raised for discussion in the UK.

8. In conclusion, much improvement has been noted over the last year. The external reviewers noted the uniformly good attendance at the daily operations meeting, which was symptomatic of a well-engaged Tier-1. A lot was mentioned about process and complexity and it would help if some of this could be tackled at the wLCG level, that is, issues of wider applicability should be raised and discussed at the GDB. Manpower at RAL was about felt to be about right with the addition of the DBA this year, but there was a concern that the lack of availability of specific personnel was too frequently impeding progress. The formal processes enacted have helped at a high-level but care must be taken to balance this by empowering individuals to be responsive to incidents when appropriate and to maintain agility.