

EPSRC Strategic Infrastructure Outlines

Webinar Q&A - February 2024

This document provides answers to the questions asked at the EPSRC Strategic Infrastructure Outline Stage webinar, held on 12th February 2024. Most questions were answered live during the webinar and are repeated in this document. Questions that required further clarifications and could not be answered live are answered here with written responses.

The Institutional Limit

1. Is there an institutional limit and when was it introduced?

Strategic Infrastructure is a strategic opportunity intended to enhance UK scientific capability aimed at regional or national level rather than at a project level, it is therefore key that institutions tension submissions and rank them based on institutional priorities.

EPSRC encourage institutions to take a strategic approach and to prioritise the applications that are of the highest strategic importance to them.

EPSRC expects no more than three applications from each institution at the outline stage.

This expectation was communicated in November 2023 to potential applicants and research offices who attended the November 2023 webinar. The limit is EPSRC's expectation rather than enforcement at this round.

It is key for institutions to understand that the institutional limit of three should **NOT** be seen as a target by institutions. EPSRC usually receive less than three applications from most institutions at each call. Applications should only be submitted when they fully address the assessment criteria and contribute to institutional priorities.

2. Does the institutional limit apply to invited resubmissions and resources to support existing strategic infrastructure route? What will happen if my institution submits more than three outlines?

The institutional limit applies to both the invited re-submissions and resources to support existing strategic infrastructure route. In other words, invited resubmissions and resources outlines count towards the institutional limit of three applications.

EPSRC is committed to process all grants with robustness, transparency and fairness. In the event where the call is oversubscribed, we will either update the assessment process timeline or request institutions to re-prioritise to ensure our commitment to the highest standards of compliance. The decision making on which route we choose will depend on the volume of applications received.

3. My institution seems to be operating with a hard limit of one application in each round, so we don't compete with ourselves. Can you offer any comment on this approach? Is the number of grants from a particular institution likely to be a factor in decision making?

Institutions have the highest level of autonomy on the shortlisting and decision making process for strategic infrastructure outlines. Institutions vary in size and nature and as such each institution has its own process for internal demand management. Therefore, EPSRC is unable to comment on individual institution's sifting approach. The overarching guidance from EPSRC is that we would like institutions to take a strong strategic approach and prioritise the applications based on institutional strategy and priorities.

The number of proposals from an individual institution is not a factor in deciding which proposals are successful as part of the assessment process.

EPSRC would like to emphasise that the submissions made should be considered as strategic necessity for the host institution which enhances and compliments the institutional long-term strategy, **NOT** an infrastructure 'nice to have'. Institutions should be highly selective about which applications they put forward taking into account the strategic importance of the infrastructure to the host institution.

4. Given that institutions come in all shapes and sizes, and the accessibility aims, will this be considered in relaxing the limit for very large institutions?

The institutional limit of three is based on an EPSRC data search of the maximum number of applications typically submitted by institutions. This data search included institutions of all sizes including large, medium and small. Some UKRI councils have institutional limits of two applications for their infrastructure calls (see NERC's capital call for example [NERC strategic capital funding opportunity 2023 – UKRI](#)).

EPSRC does recognise some exceptional circumstances and the varied community needs from the engineering and physical sciences community. In the next two rounds, we will have a process to review this limit. If you have an oversight of an institution/centre or work in a Research Office and would like to take part in the review please contact epsrcequipmentfunding@epsrc.ukri.org.

Accessibility Plans

5. Is the "Accessibility" element only about accessibility in terms of people with disabilities, diversity of protected characteristics etc? Or does this also include diversity of types of users (e.g. academic, industrial, different research specialities etc)?

It's about universal accessibility, including user diversity of everyone, whether researchers or the team supporting the infrastructure. The accessibility plan is not focussed on types of user, but rather to think about how you might remove barriers and enable accommodations or customisations that might be needed for those with a disability or other individual needs (e.g. those with caring responsibilities etc). EPSRC's goal is to make the infrastructure we invest in as accessible as possible; to exclude no one.

Accessibility is about removing barriers enabling users to engage and participate in everyday activities, making information or environments usable for as many people as possible. This is

important so that everyone can access information, resources and facilities. This means individuals are not disadvantaged by not being aware of something or unable to access something that may otherwise have a positive impact for them. Creating a welcoming, inclusive, and accessible environment gives everyone a chance to access the same opportunities, enabling them to reach their full potential. The lack of accessible working environments in academic settings means people with disabilities face unnecessary burdens and extra challenges to achieve effective participation on an equal basis with others.

6. Is the webinar on accessibility from the UKRI EDI Caucus (<https://edicaucus.ac.uk/>) prior or post the outline stage closing?

It will be after the outline stage, as part of the full application stage webinar. There are some helpful good practices that can be found in UEA's Lab Access guidelines as an example [Access Guidelines - Groups and Centres \(uea.ac.uk\)](#).

7. Will the accessibility webinar from the UKRI EDI Caucus only be for successful outline applicants or will it be open to all?

The live webinar will be for successful applicants only. However, the recording will be published and shared for wider access to the community.

8. By disability, do we only mean physical disability or other issues (dyspraxia, dyslexia, etc.) are also considered?

By disability we include **all forms** of disability and not just physical disability. A disability is the experience of any condition that makes it more difficult for a person to do certain activities and/or have full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Disabilities may be cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, sensory, or a combination of multiple factors. Disabilities can be present from birth or can be acquired during a person's lifetime. Disabilities can be permanent or temporary. Historically, disabilities have only been recognised based on a narrow set of criteria. However, disabilities are not binary and are more likely present in unique characteristics depending on the individual. The focus should be on the user experience of accessibility within society rather than on an individual's disability. Removing barriers and enabling users to engage and participate in everyday activities, making information or environments usable for as many people as possible. You should consider how to create an inclusive and accessible physical space as well as accessible content that covers language used and messaging, the structure and format of communications.

Call Eligibility

9. Who should we ask to find out if we can re-apply for the grant?

It should be addressed to epsrcequipmentfunding@epsrc.ukri.org.

10. Will joint applications from two institutions be accepted? For example, where equipment situated at two sites forms a single facility?

Applicants from more than one institution can be listed as part of the core team but only one person can be listed as the project lead.

11. Is there an upper limit in funds provided?

EPSRC expect all the resources and costs requested to be justified. The cost justification will be assessed at both the outline and full proposal stages.

Proposals for infrastructure costing more than £3 million should contact us to discuss the most appropriate route.

12. Can multi-user, multi-project include teaching?

The purpose of the opportunity is to support equipment for research rather than for teaching, so your application should focus on this. However, requesting a piece of equipment to drive forward the careers of early career researchers (ECRs) in areas of strategic importance to the university is acceptable (see Example 4 on the funding opportunity web page [Strategic infrastructure – UKRI](#)).

The university may also allocate time on the equipment to ECRs and PhD students.

Equipment intended for teaching purposes would normally be requested under the core equipment funding opportunity [Core equipment – UKRI](#) rather than strategic infrastructure.

13. Is it possible to ask for technician time?

Resources including technician time need to be justified. For example, it'll have to be evidenced that this is an infrastructure grant instead of research project grant. In other words, we don't expect PDRA/technician time to work on research projects.

14. What type of costs (e.g., equipment, staff, etc.) will be accepted under pump priming?

A small amount of time for pump priming projects can be requested to maximise utilisation of the proposed infrastructure. Applicants can request either equipment or resources on the pump priming funds but this will have to be in line with the eligible and capital and non-capital costs described at [Strategic infrastructure for engineering and physical sciences: Oct 2023 – UKRI](#).

15. Could you confirm that service and instrument maintenance costs are not eligible in this funding opportunity?

Service contracts are an eligible research cost for route 1: strategic infrastructure. If service contracts are included in the quote for the equipment they can be claimed as a capital cost up to 100% full economic cost. Independent service contracts are also eligible but these can only be claimed as resource costs at 80% FEC.

For route 2: resources to support existing strategic infrastructure, resources requested need to be beyond what already exists, so replacing a service contract wouldn't be eligible.

In the long term, we would expect applicants to detail how they will cover maintenance costs in the sustainability section of their application.

16. Given existing calls related directly to DRI and AI infrastructure, would investment for smaller systems be supported or would there need to a clear description as to how they complement national infrastructure.

EPSRC strategic infrastructure opportunity does not have a direct linkage to the current UKRI DRI programme. The opportunity supports digital infrastructure including central processing units and computing hardware but does not fund software development or cloud computing credits. A clear description on how it sits within the national landscape will be needed.

17. Are costs for accompanying infrastructure modification, i.e. building / lab refurbishment etc. eligible via this scheme?

Lab refurbishment is considered as a host institution contribution. Exceptional cases will have to be discussed with EPSRC prior to the application.

18. Some proposals may be invited to resubmit at outline stage - can you elaborate on this mechanism?

An invitation to resubmit will be detailed in the outcome and feedback provided to applicants.

Note that due to the high volume of applications received, EPSRC are only able to provide feedback for applicants who are successful or invited to resubmit.

19. Would this call fund virtual strategic infrastructure?

It would depend on what the proposed infrastructure was and whether the majority of the research enabled was within EPSRC's remit. We suggest you contact us directly to discuss the details.

20. Is there a total budget for this call (not per application, but the total budget allocated to this call by EPSRC)?

EPSRC strategic infrastructure budget comes under the world class labs. We don't have a set figure for each call or the total budget as this is a recurring call. The estimated budget for the opportunity each year is £30 million.

The capital costs for this call draw down on EPSRC's world class labs budget whilst resources costs as funded through EPSRC theme budgets (e.g. physical sciences, ICT etc).

21. If an institution has an idea which is larger than the scale of this scheme (e.g. around £10M) are there any other routes to engage with EPSRC regarding funding?

EPSRC would encourage you to email us directly to discuss your requirements so we can work out the best option for this.

Any requests above £20 million should consider the UKRI Infrastructure Fund route.

22. For the requirement of the equipment supporting multiple projects, how much detail should be given into the diversity of projects, or is it enough to give a high-level listing of the

scope of the projects? Would it be seen as a weaker justification if all the projects can be perceived as “one large project” (multi-year)?

EPSRC outline and full proposal panels seek evidence of the strong demand and community need from a diverse and inclusive user base. It'll depend on the nature of the proposed infrastructure and how users and projects can benefit from the infrastructure. There is no one size fits all answer.

How to Apply

23. In regard to the 'core team' question, are you looking for details on staff who are delivering the project itself or staff who are supporting the proposal?

The list of key members should be submitted at the application stage. They include:

- project lead (PL)
- project co-lead (UK) (PcL)
- project co-lead (international) (PcL (I))
- researcher co-lead (RcL)
- specialist
- grant manager
- professional enabling staff
- research and innovation associate
- technician
- visiting researcher

Only list one individual as project lead.

24. Could you confirm the date for the submission of full proposal?

If an application is successful at the outline panel, information on the opening and closing dates for the full proposal stage will be provided with the application guidance. The full proposal stage will be open for 6-7 weeks.

We expect the full proposal stage to be open from mid-April until the end of May, but this may change depending on the number of applications received.

25. In order to prove that there is strong demand from the user base, is it important that we secure endorsements at the outline stage, or can that be deferred to the full proposal?

Evidencing user base demand at the outline stage can strengthen the application. We understand for some infrastructure it may not be possible to provide the evidence at the outline stage. Applicants have the autonomy to decide how best to approach and evidence the strong user base demand.

Formal endorsements such as letters of support from key users are not required until the full proposal stage.

Host Institution and Project Partner Contributions

26. Is there any further guidance around the level of contribution that might be expected from the host institution and/or industry partners?

Contributions from the host organisation would be expected to be in line with the scale of the proposal. It doesn't always have to direct match funding. In-kind contributions such as staff time etc are also considered positively by the panel.

27. Is in-kind support from industrial partners allowed?

Direct or in-kind support from project partners such as industrial organisations and universities that aren't involved in the project, is allowed. Please note project partners cannot receive funds from the project, except in specific circumstances set out on the EPSRC website [Project partners letter of support – UKRI](#).

How we will assess your application

28. Can you please expand on how much further development is expected at the full proposal stage?

We expect the assessment criteria for the full proposal stage to be similar to the criteria in the most recent full proposal stage [Strategic infrastructure for engineering and physical sciences: Oct 2023 – UKRI](#).

There may be minor updates to some aspects of the assessment criteria. For example, we will be adding the accessibility plan requirement in the full proposal stage.

29. The piece of equipment we'd like to propose is around 50% more expensive than when another institution acquired one in 2018. Will the panel look at the historical value for money, or does the increase in costs now hinder us? Our application will likely exceed the £3m mark.

The panel will look at whether the cost of the equipment is justified and appropriate; this will take into account whether it is value for money and the support provided by the host institution. For more expensive proposals we will expect a larger host institution contribution to be in-line with the request.

The decision on whether to fund a proposal is made by the budget holder following the panel recommendation; both the panel scores and the cost may be taken into account at this stage.

30. Can you say a bit more about the assessment process for full proposals?

The assessment process for the full proposal stage includes peer review and interview panel. Further details on peer review, shortlisting and panel can be found at [Strategic infrastructure for engineering and physical sciences: Oct 2023 – UKRI](#) under 'Assessment process' section.

Other

31. There is a 10% margin on costs between outline and full. However, the timeframe from submission of full proposal, award and procurement can be very long, of the order of a year in some cases. In certain areas there has been significant cost increases of the order of 20% on major equipment. This is an inflationary problem which is quite serious. Is there any mechanism within EPSRC that can cover this potential increase in costs. Or any advice on how to address this?

If the cost increases by more than 10% between outline and full proposal stage you should contact EPSRC and let us know. Increases in costs due to inflation are acceptable provided we are informed in advance and there isn't a significant change in the nature of the project itself.

Unfortunately, we cannot increase the amount of funds awarded beyond what was submitted at full proposal stage.

EPSRC recently increased the rate of indexation to account for inflation at the offer letter stage. The indexation rate was changed to 2.48% in April 2023 and this rate will remain for all EPSRC grants until further notice.