Responsible Research in Neurotechnology Network Plus
15 September 2021 Webinar

Topics covered in webinar Q and A

Contents

Contact information:

General questions to healthcare@epsrc.ukri.org

Offer from Charlie Winkworth-Smith to help find project partners:

charlie.winkworth-smith@ktn-uk.org

Ethical and societal questions not limited to bioethics domain

The intention of mentioning bioethics is not to limit but to illustrate who might be involved. It is for networks to make the case for the range of people they plan to engage with, as appropriate for the research focus. We encourage applicants to think about developing the capacity to articulate and address the questions arising, as we move forward with the neurotechnologies agenda. This can include issues across a range of ethical and societal domains.

Background of principal investigators and co-investigators

The applicant team must be eligible to be principal or co-investigator, but beyond that, they should be appropriate for the proposal. You will need to make the case that is it the person best placed to lead that network, and as such, they can come from an engineering and physical sciences background or a medical or clinical background.

The leader will usually be the person with the enthusiasm and the vision, and you will need to demonstrate those characteristics as part of the leadership.

Our panel commented that if the team were all engineers or all clinicians, peer review might have some questions about how you will build a multidisciplinary network. They also noted that it's a significant commitment of time and energy and you should think about that in the early stages.

Partner eligibility

People can have more than one role on a network. The principle is about having the right team to build the community, identify key research challenges and help all those with an interest in the research focus to address any questions raised by those research challenges. If that will be strengthened by having colleagues from outside the UK, then they would be welcome, and it will be for you to make that case in your proposal. However, the proposals are subject to our normal rules and there are some restrictions regarding some of the roles on a proposal:

- The eligibility for the applicant team is the same as for other EPSRC grants, so they would have to be academic or equivalent employees of an eligible organisation and resident in the UK. Or hold a permanent post at an NHS Trust, hospital, board, primary care trust or GP practice. For more information, please see the following: Check if you're eligible for EPSRC funding
- A project partner is a collaborating organisation which will have an integral role in the network. Although please note that project partners cannot normally receive funding directly from the grant. There are no restrictions on the numbers of project partners, and you will be expected to provide a letter of support from each of them. This "project partner letter of support" provides

an opportunity to outline why they are interested and what they will bring to the network. For more information please see: Project partners letter of support.

- Collaborating organisations and individuals. There are no restrictions on who these might be. You can have up to three letters of support from people or organisations that are not project partners. Please note that we will return proposals for amendment if this is exceeded and will not be able to take them forward in our peer review until they meet the same requirements as apply to all the other proposals.

There is also the potential for people to be network members, on the advisory board, champions for particular activity or theme or in roles we have not yet thought of. These groups should reflect the research focus of the network.

Our panel commented:

- It may strengthen a proposal to include any plans to develop and grow the membership to reflect the key challenges and any gaps you will see as the research agenda develops.
- Looking across the range of people and their roles is a good opportunity to consider the diversity of your network. Perhaps not only in comparison with the current range of protected characteristics, but neurodiversity and other factors.
- While travel is difficult at the moment, networks had funded visits to internationally leading institutions and bringing people to join network activities.
- Networks had also invited International keynote speakers to their events and included the costs in their budget for network activities.

Finding partners

Charlie Winkworth-Smith of the Knowledge Transfer Network in neuro-technology has offered to help people find project partners: charlie.winkworth-smith@ktn-uk.org.

As part of the registration for the webinar, we asked if we could circulate names and potential topics to all the people who registered. We have the names of 54 people who opted-in for this and will contact them via email

We are also seeking permission to circulate information from the expressions of interest to other potential applicants. Please note that you would have to "opt-in" for us to be able to do this.

Our panel mentioned there can be networks of networks and friends of friends. That cold calling can at least get the conversation going.

The panel noted that there are tools to see UKRI grant-holders so you can see who is winning awards in this area. The UKRI gateway to publicly funded research and innovation allows you to search for and analyse information on the latest research in the UK). There is also the EPSRC 'Visualising our portfolio' resource.

The panel also recommended contacting your own research office as they may be able to help identify potential contacts within your own institution, regular partner institutions or elsewhere.

The panel mentioned you might like to consider the overall size of the network that will be appropriate for the community and research focus. They suggested thinking about what will be manageable.

One of the observations was about thinking creatively about how to bring people into the network as you develop the focus and research agenda. There may be expertise where there isn't a connection, yet, but could provide innovative solutions.

Building your investigator team

The investigator team should be what is appropriate for the community and research focus and justified in that context. The numbers are restricted to the principal investigator plus up to four co-investigators as this is intended to be the people setting up and running the network.

It may be difficult to distinguish between the core team and network members who are very engaged and active but remember that the role of project partners provides additional space to outline their roles, in the letters of support. The emphasis in the proposal and for the funding should be on the network activities and feasibility studies.

Our panel observed that it will be easier to make the case for an inclusive and diverse investigator team if this includes people from a range of institutions.

Neurotechnology definition

Our definition covers the whole breadth of neurotechnology, not only implants but non-invasive technologies as well. We are looking for innovation and there are probably technologies that are very early stage and we're still not aware of. This opportunity is intended to be inclusive, and it is for the applicants to make their case for why we should have a network with that specific research focus. This might include developing new capabilities.

Research on either development of new technology or adaptation of existing technology is eligible

The research councils fund research that develops new knowledge, techniques and technologies and research that adapts techniques and technologies, for example so they can be used in new applications. It is for the applicants to build the case for why that research focus is important and should be funded. Proposals will be assessed in competition for the funding.

Alignment with MRC's strategic priorities

For MRC, one of our key priorities is medical technologies and this cuts across the whole research portfolio. Neurotechnologies has the potential to provide an alternative to pharmaceutical treatments across a range of neurological and mental health conditions and this is an important aspect for us. It's one of the reasons we were particularly pleased to work with EPSRC on this opportunity.

This partnership offers the prospect of moving developments along the translational pipeline. So not only can we have clinical needs and context informing the research challenges for these networks, but there is also the prospect of going from fundamental engineering and physical sciences research to developments that we can take into a clinical setting. Given we are working to optimise the potential for patient benefit, it is a key priority area for us. We expect it to remain a priority going forward.

Funding available

There is no cap on the amount for any one proposal, but we expect to fund three to five proposals and the overall EPSRC and MRC budget is £6 million. The expected budget for each network is in the area of £1.2 million to £2 million.

Full economic costing for feasibility studies

The "plus" of Network Plus is that the grants include funding for distribution for feasibility or proof of concept studies. Each study will typically be in the region of £50,000 to £80,000, to test approaches to particular research challenges identified by the network. A feasibility study may help to inform preparation for a larger project proposal to EPSRC or MRC.

EPSRC does not stipulate whether the funds for proof-of concept or feasibility studies must be transferred at 80% of the full economic cost or at 100%. However, the normal grant arrangements apply and funds in the grant to the lead institution will be awarded at 80% full economic cost.

All costs for the feasibility studies need to be shown on the proposal form **under Directly Incurred other costs at 80% FEC**.

- The costs should cover support for a series of feasibility projects to advance research projects.
- These feasibility funds should be intended to support development of research ideas, generation of proof-of-concept data and identification of clinical/industry support for example.
- The costing should be based on the numbers of projects you are proposing to fund, and the PDRA resource required to develop the research.
- We do not specify arrangements for estates and indirect for the feasibility studies but as the network plus is giving out money for feasibility studies through your own call, it is up to you to set the rules about what can and cannot be applied for need in order to efficiently run the network.

You will wish to check with your research office, before applying, about the transfer of funds and how you can ensure that costings and arrangements will be transparent for any recipient universities.

The collaboration agreements and fund transfers are likely to be a call on staff time and we recommend bearing this in mind when developing your proposal. Network Plus proposals can include funds for administrative or network support.

There are some restrictions in that feasibility studies can only be the kind of research that EPSRC funds through its research grant route. So that, for example, the recipient organisation should be eligible for EPSRC funding. The funds cannot be used for studentships or for the kind of training and support that would be drawn from a doctoral training grant.

Previous advice from Network Plus leads:

- Each network will be acting almost as a mini research council and you will need to plan the process carefully to be transparent and robust
- We recommend early conversations with your finance office on how to manage the funds and transfers
- There may need to be iteration of the costings so that finance and other offices in your research organisation can confirm the viability of the arrangements

The questions on the 'expression of interest' form

1. Please provide the name of the person you expect to lead the proposal for a network plus in neuro-technologies (principal investigator)
2. Please provide the email address of the principal investigator for this proposal (please use the same email address which is registered in your Je-S profile)
3. Please name the co-Investigators for the proposed Network Plus (note there can be up to four)
4. Please can you confirm that your research office is aware of your intent to submit a proposal to this call?
5. Please Include the name of research office contact who has been informed
6. What is the title (tentative) of the proposed Network Plus?
7. Please name any clinical/healthcare partners involved with this proposal.
8. Please name any non-clinical partners involved with this proposal (for example, business or academic).
9. Please list 5 keywords relating to the research focus for this network plus
10. Approximate value of the funds (£'s) to be requested from EPSRC (at 80% FEC)
11. Please briefly describe the focus for this network plus (maximum 1000 characters)
12. Please confirm whether we can share your name and the current title of your Network Plus proposal with the PIs for other Network Plus expressions of interest. Please note that we cannot share your information unless you confirm you wish to opt-in to this.

Submit an expression of interest (SmartSurvey)

Responses must be submitted via this online form.

Intellectual property (IP)

For the feasibility studies, you will have the benefit of your research or finance office making the arrangements and setting up collaboration agreements. IP should be mentioned within those.

Our panel commented that you will be talking about new ideas amongst network members from the outset. There's an element of trust and if you enter into the activities feeling protective of your ideas then then you're not going to get a lot out of the network. The target is collaboration rather than competition. This also applies across networks, so that each one can work constructively with the other research networks.

Research organisations with existing Network Plus grants

Find information on the research organisations funded through the Healthcare Network Plus 2020 opportunity.