NERC Discovery Science Town Hall Webinars, February/March 2022 – Questions and Answers

This document provides responses to questions raised through the Zoom Q&A function during both webinars delivered on 17th February 2022 and 9th March 2022. This includes those that were answered live and those that we were not able to answer on the day. Where multiple similar questions were submitted, these have been addressed together under a single overarching question. Any questions relating to information that is readily available in the funding opportunity details for Pushing the Frontiers and Exploring the Frontiers have not been included as this information is now available via UKRI's Funding Finder. Questions have been grouped under common themes.

Strategic rationale for portfolio changes and development of new schemes

Q: Can you summarise the budget changes to the Discovery Science portfolio?

A: Overall budget uplift of £15m per year will be realised (annual budget to be increased gradually, and uplift fully attained by 2026). The Discovery Science portfolio was identified as a priority for an uplift in funding. Pushing the Frontiers will retain the budget of the old Standard Grant scheme, which was increased in 2021 to £26m per call (2 calls per year); Exploring the Frontiers has a planned budget of £4m per year; the annual budget for Large Grants will increase from £9m to £12m to enable more excellent science to be supported; the award limit for individual Urgency Grants will be increased from £65,000 to £100,000 in recognition of increasing costs and the lack of uplift for this scheme for some time.

Q: Will any consideration be given (or weighting be applied) when making funding decisions, with regard to the levelling-up agenda or other areas of disparity?

A: We are not considering regional disparity (or other measures) as part of funding decisions at this time but will continue to monitor data to inform strategic discussions and policy at NERC and UKRI level.

Q: What is NERC's approach to risk in the two new schemes?

A: The two new schemes are intended to support high-risk, high-reward, ambitious, frontier-pushing science and we encourage Research Organisations to refer to the requirements of these calls when providing guidance to applicants and carrying out internal demand management processes. Reviewers and panellists will be given detailed guidance on how to assess this while balancing with consideration of feasibility. NERC will not be prescriptive regarding how to demonstrate riskiness or feasibility.

Q: There is concern among the community that the Exploring the Frontiers scheme will lead to a lot of short-term contracts, which could have negative impacts for career stability for early career researchers (ECRs) and recruitment of post-doctoral research assistants (PDRAs).

A: Exploring the Frontiers represents a new investment stream, complementary to the other Discovery Science investments in the portfolio. The opportunities for longer-term contracts still exist through those other routes and are not being removed through the introduction of this new scheme.

However, we consider the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) impacts of our funding opportunities, including impact on career development, in designing a funding call. As such we have emphasised that the smaller grants supported by Exploring the Frontiers are intended to be used flexibly, and appointment of a PDRA is not a requisite. Exploring the Frontiers is currently a pilot, and we will monitor the outcomes of this first round of investment, considering if there are unintended negative outcomes as well as what the investment has achieved for Discovery Science.

Q: How will NERC judge whether the Exploring the Frontiers pilot has been a success?

A: We plan to evaluate the scheme based around the ambitions of the scheme, UKRI's [Reforming our Business](#) agenda, and NERC desire to ensure its funding opportunities support Diversity and Inclusion. The review will consider factors including (but not limited to): who has been funded; what sort of projects have been supported; whether any changes should be made to the call frequency or timetable; whether any demand management measures are required. The review will be informed by feedback from representatives across the NERC community.

Q: What were the outcomes of the review of the Pushing the Frontiers pilot and how have these been used?

A: The internal review of the Pushing the Frontiers 2020 pilot demonstrated that it was successful in attracting proposals from applicants across a range of career stages presenting transformational science with high-risk and ambitious aims, and that the reduction and changes to paperwork were popular among applicants and assessors and were successful in saving time and effort for those involved in the assessment process (please see NERC's [report of progress against its Delivery Plan ambitions](#) in 2021). The reduced scoring scale was deemed fit for purpose and considered easy to use by reviewers; minor amendments were suggested to improve the ability of panels to rank proposals. In recognition of the fact that research is very often team-based, and to ensure the Pushing the Frontiers scheme supports recognition and development of individuals across the NERC community, it was recommended that applications through the new schemes could include named researchers within teams, rather than just the PI. These outcomes have directly informed the development of the two new schemes and the processes and changes we are putting in place reflect the detailed feedback from multiple groups of stakeholders received as part of that review.

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New schemes – scope, timelines, eligibility and proposal requirements

Q: What types of projects will be considered under the two new schemes? For example, are projects that are applied, technology-led, or purely theoretical or computational in nature, within scope?

A: As with previous Discovery Science schemes, these types of proposal are all within the scope of both the Pushing the Frontiers and Exploring the Frontiers schemes. As long as the environmental research challenge that a proposal is addressing is aligned with the call requirements and NERC's Discovery Science ambitions, it is for applicants to decide what is the most appropriate tool to address that challenge and justify that within the proposal. Reviewers and panel members will be given clear guidance on the need to treat all types of proposals fairly and assess each one individually based on the call requirements and scoring criteria.

Q: Would proposals applying for funding below the maximum limit be at any competitive disadvantage compared with projects using the full budget allowance?

A: No. Assessment and funding decisions will be based on the quality of the research proposed and the capability of the team to deliver it. As part of the decision-making process for projects in the funding envelope, consideration will be given to whether the funds requested are appropriate to the work being proposed. The maximum funding amount is a limit and not a target.

Q: Given the smaller amount of funding available for Exploring the Frontiers grants, are NERC expecting or encouraging any institutional contributions for these projects?

A: No, NERC will not stipulate any institutional contributions towards these projects and it will be made clear to reviewers and panels that this will not be a factor in assessment of proposals.

Q: Does NERC intend to review the frequency of calls under the Exploring the Frontiers scheme and the timeline of the assessment process to enable researchers to use this funding in a more dynamic way?

A: The number of calls NERC should/could run annually under the Exploring the Frontiers scheme, and the assessment timelines, will be considered as part of the review of the 2022 pilot, which will directly inform future calls.

Q: Is there any expectation that proposals submitted to either of the new schemes will involve multiple individuals or multiple institutions?

A: No. For both schemes, proposals are welcomed from either individuals or teams, and can be either single or multi-institution projects. Assessment will be based on the quality of the research idea being proposed and the capability of the team (or individual, as applicable) to

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deliver the proposed work. We will not be prescriptive on team composition or collaborations and reviewers and panellists will be given guidance to this effect.

Q: What are the rules around international collaborations for the new schemes?

A: For Pushing the Frontiers, the rules regarding involvement of international collaborators are identical to those for the old Standard Grant scheme – they can act as project partners, or engage with the project via existing [UKRI Lead Agency Agreements](#) (LAAs) or in line with [UKRI's International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) Co-Investigator eligibility rules](#). For Exploring the Frontiers it will not be feasible to support grants through LAAs, so involvement of international collaborators on this scheme will be limited to the role of project partner or as an eligible IIASA Co-Investigator.

Q: What is the process for approval of detailed project finances for successful proposals?

A: NERC will require details of project finances for successful proposals to enable us to manage costs for services and facilities and requests for equipment. These costs will need to be approved internally before an award letter can be issued. While there will be some flexibility allowed with regards to defining individual cost lines within the overall project budget between submission and approval, NERC would not normally accept a change in overall budget following submission.

Q: Will this year's funding opportunities be delivered through the Joint Electronic Submission System (Je-S) or the new Funding Service?

A: This year's funding opportunities will be delivered using Je-S. The transition to the new Funding Service is underway and a number of pilot opportunities are being run on it to test its systems. As soon as we are able to, we will run future opportunities using the new service and will provide as much advance notice of this as possible.

Q: Will the Je-S form requirements remain the same or will they change to reflect the reduction in paperwork?

A: As the Je-S system is being phased out, there will be no changes to the Je-S form sections or document requirements settings for these funding opportunities. There will, therefore, be some sections that require dummy/blank documents to fulfil certain Je-S requirements. Please see the full details of the funding opportunities on [UKRI's Funding Finder](#) for information on what sections will be required for each scheme and any necessary actions to work around mandatory Je-S requirements. Please note that this is a temporary measure while we transition to the new Funding Service.

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Q: Will the new schemes stipulate either single or multiple Je-S forms for multi-organisational proposals?

A: As currently, there will be no stipulation either way regarding submission of single or multiple Je-S applications for multi-institutional proposals. It is at the submitting organisations' discretion whether they choose to submit one application covering multiple organisations or component applications for each partner organisation (noting the relationship between the different options and demand management). The only stipulation (which has not changed) is that NERC Research Centres submit a separate component Je-S form due to the way that they receive their funding from NERC.

Q: Now that project partner letters of support are not required, please can you outline how applicants should provide details of project partner involvement?

A: Project partner information, which includes details of in-kind contributions, should still be entered on the Je-S proforma. Project partners' commitments or roles can also be noted briefly in the case for support if required (for example, within the Capability to Deliver section if their in-kind contribution is vital to the success of the project). The inclusion of a named project partner in the proposal documentation will be taken as confirmation of their commitment to delivering their agreed contribution to the project. Separate letters of support would not serve any additional purpose and represent an additional administrative burden on applicants and their project partners; hence they are no longer required.

Q: What will the re-submission policy be for unfunded proposals through the new schemes?

A: There has been no change to the re-submission policy outlined in the NERC Grants Handbook. Unsuccessful proposals cannot be re-submitted within 9 months of the closing date of the original submission. This policy applies to both Pushing the Frontiers and Exploring the Frontiers. We advise applicants to bear in mind any reviewer or panel feedback received for their original proposal when considering a re-submission. Proposals that are re-worked from either a Pushing the Frontiers or Exploring the Frontiers proposal to fit the requirements of the other scheme would not be considered a re-submission under this policy due to the fundamental differences between the schemes and the influence that would have on the scope of the proposal.

Q: Will individuals be able to apply to both the Pushing the Frontiers call and the Exploring the Frontiers call in same year?

A: Yes. These are two separate schemes and will be treated separately when it comes to calculating numbers of applications from individual investigators and assessing the proposed work. Within each funding opportunity, the usual limits apply on the number of proposals that an individual can be named on as either a Principal Investigator or a Co-Investigator. Please see the funding opportunity details on the UKRI Funding Finder for further information. While it is possible to submit proposals for linked activities simultaneously to the two separate schemes, it should be noted that if there is obvious duplication or

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significant overlap of project activity across separate submissions to the two calls (e.g. the same data being collected), this could lead to rejection of a proposal. Proposals must address the scope of each call directly and not duplicate work submitted for funding through other calls. Applicants should also be mindful to avoid introducing dependencies between linked activities. We are very happy to respond to specific queries from potential applicants regarding the scope and requirements of these schemes when they are considering which call to submit to.

Q: Is the purpose of Exploring the Frontiers scheme to provide the proof-of-concept needed for the Pushing the Frontiers scheme, or would it be possible to submit a Pushing the Frontiers proposal without first securing a successful Exploring the Frontiers grant?

A: Demonstrating proof-of-concept is one way of approaching an Exploring the Frontiers proposal. However, these grants can also be used to support stand-alone work on a smaller scale. Likewise, Pushing the Frontiers projects can also be novel, stand-alone pieces of work. There is no requirement for a Pushing the Frontiers proposal to be preceded by Exploring the Frontiers-funded work.

Q: Please can you clarify the policy on start dates and grant durations for both schemes?

A: For both schemes, funding duration and start date are not fixed. The duration requested should be appropriate for the research being proposed and the requirements of the specific project and researchers involved, and projects should align with the ambitions of the calls. It is also important that applicants request realistic start dates in their proposals based on the needs of the project and any dependencies to be considered. Given the maximum funding limits for the schemes, we anticipate that the majority of grants will be up to 4 years for Pushing the Frontiers and around 6-12 months for Exploring the Frontiers but expect flexibility to be utilised where necessary, especially for Exploring the Frontiers (e.g. for the purposes of part-time working). In the event that plans change, it is possible to delay your original requested/announced grant start date. For responsive mode grants, the current UKRI policy is that grant start dates may be delayed by up to 6 months where necessary. Changes to this policy would be made at a UKRI level and we will provide updated guidance should this occur.

Q: Please can you clarify how cross-council research will be managed through the new schemes?

A: The approach to supporting cross-council research will not change with the implementation of these new schemes. All submitted proposals will be checked internally for alignment with NERC remit and shared with other councils as necessary to identify the most appropriate lead council for assessment and potential funding of the proposed research. We will provide guidance on next steps if the most appropriate lead council is not NERC. When considering fit to NERC remit, we take into account the ultimate goals of the project and the primary application of the work proposed, not just the fundamental science. Therefore, it is possible for techniques or research within discipline areas that are normally outside of NERC's remit

to be considered to still be majority NERC remit due to the way they are being applied – i.e. directly addressing an environmental science challenge. As always, potential applicants are encouraged to check the [areas we fund](#) and contact NERC prior to submission with any queries regarding the remit of their work if they are at all unsure. Proposals processed through the two new schemes will be allocated to panels based on remit clusters and we will work with other research councils to ensure appropriate expertise is used when assessing cross-disciplinary proposals.

New schemes – assessment process and criteria

Q: Will proposals be sifted at notification of intent (NoI) stage for Exploring the Frontiers?

A: No. The NoIs will not be used for assessment purposes and no sifting will take place at this stage. The purpose of the NoIs is primarily to understand demand, gauge potential panel allocations and identify potential conflicts of interest for use in selecting panel members.

Q: Please can you explain the pre-panel process for both schemes?

A: We intend for all proposals, in both schemes, to be taken to panel. No pre-panel sifting based on pre-scores is planned. Exploring the Frontiers proposals will be assessed only by an expert panel and not externally reviewed. Given the potential for a large number of Exploring the Frontiers proposals, we intend to implement a means of prioritising discussion time at panel based on introducer comments and scores. Therefore, proposals consistently judged to be of lower quality by all introducers will not be discussed in detail; in these cases, discussion will be limited to agreement of final scores and the panel's recommendation that they are not fundable. The details of this process will be finalised in discussion with the panel chairs. All proposals will receive feedback based on introducer comments. For Pushing the Frontiers, applicants will also have the opportunity to see and respond to reviewer comments ahead of panel.

Q: Can you provide assurance that the panels for Exploring the Frontiers will have sufficient expertise across all the topics it considers (and likewise for panels considering cross-disciplinary proposals in both schemes)?

A: The purpose of the NoI stage for Exploring the Frontiers is to gauge the spread of topics we expect to see submitted and understand what organisations will be submitting proposals. This will give us the maximum time to identify panels with sufficient expertise to cover the topics within the call. We will also use the NoIs to establish the most appropriate number of panels to create and how best to split proposals between them based on remit groupings. We have the option to extend panel membership beyond NERC's Peer Review College if needed, to ensure appropriate coverage of expertise. For proposals that cross disciplines, we will liaise with other research councils as appropriate to identify suitable reviewers and panel members to ensure a fair assessment of proposals. As there is no external review stage for Exploring the Frontiers, and assessment will be carried out by the panel only, we will assign a minimum of three introducers to each proposal to avoid situations where there

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are two conflicting opinions or scores and ensure good coverage of research areas. For Pushing the Frontiers, as for Standard Grants, the role of Readers at panels will be to assist in discussions where there are scoring discrepancies. All panels will be provided with detailed guidance on how to approach the assessment or moderation process and how to utilise the expert reviewer comments (where applicable), especially where proposals are cross-disciplinary.

Q: Will NERC expand its Peer Review College membership and panel membership given the additional panel requirements from Exploring the Frontiers?

A: We intend to work closely with our colleagues in the NERC Peer Review College management team to assess the future demand on College members' time related to these new schemes and establish action we need to take regarding College membership and training. We will also consider the best approach to expanding panel membership beyond Peer Review College members where necessary.

Q: With reduced paperwork there is a risk that reviewers and panel members may make assumptions when less detail is provided, which could have negative impacts from a Diversity and Inclusion perspective or lead to potential for introducing bias. How will NERC ensure this does not happen?

A: To enable as fair a process as possible, reviewers and panel members will be provided with detailed guidance on how to approach the assessment and moderation process, which will be clear on the importance of basing scores and comments on the evidence provided in the written proposal, reviewer comments and applicant responses (as applicable). Reviewer and panel guidance will also emphasise the importance of assessing all proposals on their own individual merits in the context of the call scope and to be mindful of the potential for introducing bias of any kind. Panel chairs and NERC staff will also be responsible for reiterating this guidance as needed and ensuring that scoring criteria and scales are applied appropriately and consistently across proposals and panels.

Q: How will the different aspects of the Capability to Deliver criterion be considered by reviewers and panels?

A: Capability to Deliver draws on the principles outlined in the Royal Society's Resume for Researchers. We do not intend to be prescriptive on definitions of the various aspects covered within this document (e.g. 'community' or 'contribution to research culture'), or what types of information are most appropriate to include, as this may vary based on the work being proposed. We recommend applicants follow the guidance provided in the funding opportunity details available on the UKRI Funding Finder and consider guidance provided by the Royal Society, and bear in mind that it is not possible to be exhaustive in the space available (2 sides A4 for Pushing the Frontiers and 1 side A4 for Exploring the Frontiers), so examples of fit, rather than all evidence of fit, are acceptable. Demonstrating capability to deliver need not rely on demonstrable prior experience of the research being proposed but rather evidence of the skills required to address the research question.

Reviewers and panel members will be provided with detailed guidance on how to assess this component, with a focus on whether it adequately outlines the capability of the team to deliver the proposed work and addresses the specific requirements of the funding opportunity. Guidance will also be provided on making this assessment in the context of reasonable expectations relative to applicant career stage.

Q: Please can you clarify what details should be included in the Case for Support – for example, how much information is required on methodology, potential future applications of exploratory work, or wider impact?

A: The Case for Support should include information that addresses the core requirements of the scheme and the assessment criteria outlined in the funding opportunity. It is not possible to be prescriptive about what proportion of the case should cover various aspects such as methodology, potential for impact, or aspects such as partnerships or skills development, as what is most appropriate will vary across individual proposals depending on the nature of the project. Reviewers and panel members will be given detailed guidance on how to assess proposals in line with the requirements of the funding opportunities and the assessment criteria we have outlined. They will be made aware of the reduced paperwork for these new schemes and the need to base their assessment on the written evidence provided, taking into consideration whether the available space within the Case for Support has been used effectively and the details are sufficient to assess feasibility. Consideration of potential impact of the research can be incorporated into the case for support where applicants feel this is appropriate. As previously, a dedicated statement regarding pathways to impact is not required for these schemes.

Q: Please can you clarify the scoring process through all stages of assessment and specifically the weighting process that will be used to inform panel ranking?

A: For every proposal, panels will agree a final consensus score for each criterion. For proposals in the Pushing the Frontiers call, these final scores will be determined by Introducers and Readers moderating the scores and comments from expert reviewers, taking into account the response to those reviews and adhering closely to the scoring scale and guidance. For proposals in the Exploring the Frontiers call, final scores will be reached through discussion among at least three Introducers at the panel. These consensus panel scores will be used for the ranking process.

When making final panel ranking and funding decisions, the Research Excellence (RE) criterion will be weighted twice as much as the Capability to Deliver (CtD) criterion. To assist with the ranking process, this weighting will be applied by calculating a combined score out of a potential maximum of 9 for each proposal (RE score x 2 + CtD score). These weighted calculations will only be used for the ranking process. This process is the same for both schemes.

The final output of all panels will be a ranked list of proposals and final scores out of 3 for each of the two criteria. Panels will make ranking recommendations to NERC, who will then make the final decision on funding cut-off based on budget availability. When assigning final scores, panels may use qualifiers (e.g. high, medium, low) to enable distinction between

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proposals with the same overall grades. It is also important to note that the scores and comments for both of the two separate criteria will still be considered during the ranking in situations where weighted combined scores are equal.

Q: Have experienced panel members been consulted when defining the new scoring criteria?

A: Yes. NERC's Peer Review College Chairs have been consulted on the approach to scoring and ranking for the two new schemes, and we will continue to work closely with them when refining the reviewer and panel guidance.

Q: What are NERC's expectations of funding cut-off?

A: It is not possible at this point to predict what the assessment outcomes will be or where on the scoring scale the funding cut-off will fall, especially since assessment is based on two components instead of one. We will instruct reviewers and panel members to use the full range of scores available and pay close attention to the assessment criteria and score descriptors to help ensure assessment is consistent across proposals and panels and based on the evidence provided in the proposals. We will utilise the experience and recommendations of the panels and chairs in reaching funding decisions.

Q: Please can you clarify how unfunded 9s from the January 2022 Standard Grant round will be treated with the transition to Pushing the Frontiers and how NERC will manage unfunded excellence in the future?

A: Unfunded proposals scoring 9 in the January 2022 Standard Grant round will be considered again in the first Pushing the Frontiers call (panel meetings scheduled for December 2022). These proposals will automatically be re-graded with a score of 3 for Research Excellence and offered the opportunity to submit a revised Capability to Deliver section in line with the Pushing the Frontiers assessment criteria so this can also be scored by the panel to enable them to be ranked alongside the Pushing the Frontiers proposals. These carried-forward proposals will **not** count against an organisation's demand management cap for the Pushing the Frontiers call. Regarding the potential for future unfunded excellence, NERC will monitor funding outcomes from both schemes closely and address this as appropriate. We remain open to the principle of carrying forward unfunded excellence.

Q: Please can you explain the rationale for using the new reduced (1-3) scoring scale?

A: It has been acknowledged, based on experience and feedback from panel members, that the existing 0-6 and 0-10 scoring systems used by reviewers and panel members, respectively, are not necessarily being used to their full extent and there is often significant bunching of proposals at the top end of the scoring scale. Based on the outcomes of the Pushing the Frontiers Pilot call in 2020, including feedback received during and after that pilot, it was agreed by NERC Council to move forward with a reduced scoring scale for these two new schemes on the basis that it had been shown to be effective. NERC Council also approved

the introduction of the higher weighting to be applied to the Research Excellence score, to assist the panel ranking process, which addresses feedback received following the Pushing the Frontiers pilot. It is now a priority for us to ensure that the guidance provided to those assessing proposals is sufficient to enable the scoring system to be applied reliably and consistently and we will work closely with members of NERC's Peer Review College (PRC) as we refine this guidance. We will also monitor the outcomes of both calls closely and continue to work closely with PRC members, reviewers and panel members, applicants and the wider community to ensure we continuously improve our processes and address any challenges appropriately.

Q: Please can you outline how Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) has been considered within the assessment processes for the new schemes?

A: Equality Impact Assessments have been conducted for both calls, which have considered the potential D&I impacts of the end-to-end funding opportunity delivery and assessment process and identified any mitigating actions that should be taken. An important aspect of the review of the Exploring the Frontiers pilot will be to ensure that we have identified and addressed any potential for introduction of bias or other D&I implications within our processes and that reasonable adjustments can be supported.

New schemes – guidance available for applicants

Q: Will there be dedicated guidance for the two new schemes, or will it be incorporated into an updated version of the NERC Grants Handbook?

A: The funding opportunity information available on the [UKRI Funding Finder](#) provides full details of proposal requirements, eligibility and how proposals will be assessed. This is supported by policy information in the NERC Research Grants handbook, which has been updated to reflect the recent changes to the Discovery Science portfolio.

New schemes – guidance available for reviewers and panel members

Q: Will the guidance for reviewers and panel members be made publicly available?

A: Yes. As now, all reviewer and panel guidance for active funding opportunities will be made available via the [NERC website](#) once it is finalised.

Demand management

Q: Please can you clarify NERC's approach to demand management for Pushing the Frontiers?

A: NERC will be applying demand management to the Pushing the Frontiers scheme in the same way as it currently does for Standard Grants. The calculations and process will remain the same and caps will continue to be based on success rates in the six most recent Standard Grant/Pushing the Frontiers rounds. Full details of the demand management policy and

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process can be found on the [NERC website](#). This is where caps that apply to current funding opportunities will be published.

Q: Can you clarify NERC's position regarding demand management for Exploring the Frontiers?

A: For the pilot call in 2022, there will be no formal demand management policy applied by NERC to Exploring the Frontiers. The funding opportunity will be open to all. However, research organisations should note that the available budget means we anticipate funding approximately 50 grants through this first funding opportunity. We therefore strongly encourage organisations to provide appropriate guidance and support to applicants preparing proposals for this scheme, with a focus on quality and alignment with the assessment criteria and bearing in mind that the requirements for this scheme are different to that of the Pushing the Frontiers scheme. It is for research organisations to decide whether this will require any internal quality control processes to be put in place and how best to oversee or manage the number of applications being prepared and submitted through this scheme. Following the pilot call, the Exploring the Frontiers scheme will be reviewed. One of the key questions as part of that review will be to establish whether to implement some form of demand management in future rounds, and if so, what mechanism should be used. We will endeavour to provide as much notice as possible of any future changes to this scheme. If demand management was introduced for future Exploring the Frontiers rounds, it is currently thought measures used would be applied to the two schemes separately – i.e. individuals or organisations with caps would not have to choose between the two schemes.

Q: Are there any plans to change approaches to demand management in future?

A: There are currently no plans to change the current demand management policy that applies to Pushing the Frontiers. Any potential change in how we approach demand management would need to be informed by wider activities around reforming our business and reflect any outcomes of work ongoing elsewhere looking at research bureaucracy.

New Investigators

Q: Can you clarify NERC's position regarding 'New Investigators' in the two new schemes?

A: There will no longer be a separate identifier of 'New Investigator' status in either of the two new schemes and proposals will not be split into different streams for established and earlier career researchers as they were in the Pushing the Frontiers pilot call in 2020. This decision has been made as evidence from Standard Grant rounds over recent years indicates that NIs have (proportionally) comparable, consistent success rates compared with those that do not qualify as NIs, and so such identification is not necessary; indeed, doing so could potentially illicit a bias against the proposal for being, for example, not mature.

For these first rounds of both schemes, we will continue to gather data on whether applicants would have been able to apply as a NI to enable us to monitor the outcomes for

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these individuals, and ensure the removal of NI identification does not illicit a negative bias. We will gather data on NI status via the cover letter accompanying the proposal.

Other

Q: Will NERC provide training opportunities for community members, ECRs, and potential future panellists given the significant changes to the peer review process?

A: We do plan to look at various means of offering training and guidance to the Peer Review College and wider NERC community regarding our peer review processes, in a way that ensures equal opportunities to benefit from this.

Q: Is there any potential for similar changes (e.g. reduced bureaucracy) to other NERC schemes?

A: We will work closely with our colleagues in NERC's Funding Operations team to identify the most appropriate approach to funding policy and process with regards to other NERC schemes and aim for consistency of approach wherever possible. The details of any changes will depend on the nature of the scheme in question. Any changes to specific schemes or funding opportunities will be well publicised.

Q: Will other UKRI funding bodies be following the format of NERC's new funding schemes?

A: Other research councils are also delivering UKRI-level changes within the [Reforming our Business programme](#) (e.g. reducing paperwork and moving towards the Resume for Researchers CV format) and looking at how they can implement simpler, better funding models. Several pilot funding opportunities have already been delivered. We anticipate that there will be a variety of changes across schemes within the whole of UKRI in due course, which we will aim to balance with discipline-specific requirements.

Q: Would NERC ever consider paying reviewers?

A: NERC currently does not pay reviewers. There is work ongoing in UKRI considering funding policy and process, where there are opportunities to harmonise across councils, and if so, what is the most appropriate approach to take. Any changes to NERC's current policy would be informed by these wider UKRI discussions regarding harmonisation, which it should be noted are covering multiple aspects of the assessment and funding process, not just payment.

Further information

For full details of the funding opportunity requirements for Pushing the Frontiers and Exploring the Frontiers, please see the information provided on the UKRI Funding Finder.

If you have any further questions that have not been addressed by the funding opportunities themselves, this document, or the accompanying resources produced following the webinars, please feel free to contact us via the scheme mailboxes:

Pushing the Frontiers: pushingfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org

Exploring the Frontiers: exploringfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org

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