

MRC Centres of Research Excellence: Q&A

The Medical Research Council (MRC) is changing the way we fund long-term research through Units and Centres and is adopting a new challenge-led, time-limited approach through MRC Centres of Research Excellence (MRC CoREs).

An annual funding opportunity, initially structured under priority themes, was launched in November 2022 for the first round of MRC CoRE investments. The first investments to be made under the new funding model will start in 2024.

Further details about the new funding model can be found [here](#). For details of eligibility and how to apply to the first round of MRC CoRE funding, please see the [outline funding opportunity](#).

This document addresses specific questions we have received about the new MRC CoRE funding model. If you have additional questions please send them to CoRE@mrc.ukri.org

Challenges

Q: Will applications be viewed more favourably if they show both disruption and interdisciplinarity?

A: The make-up of science, skills, tools, and technologies should be determined by the needs of the challenge you aim to address. In most instances we would expect some degree of multi- or inter-disciplinarity to tackle the most important challenges. Applications are also encouraged to be clear on what will be done differently to current efforts in the field.

Q: Is there a focus of attention on 'discovery science' or would a translational agenda (with clinical academics) be more welcome?

A: We are keen to consider both, although all applications must be positioned under a biomedical/health need as per MRC's mission.

Q: Do you envisage cohorts/clinical trials being funded?

A: No. MRC CoREs will not include infrastructure support for the establishment and maintenance of new or existing cohorts, or clinical trials. There are existing, alternative routes for support for these types of investments, which also require separate specialist assessment and consideration of the specific need for new or continued funding in the broader context of what already exists.

Of course, it will be possible for MRC CoREs to utilise existing cohorts or clinical trials which have been funded through other routes to help address their challenge. MRC CoREs might also provide evidence for establishing a new cohort or trial but these investments will be considered through separate routes as outlined above. MRC CoREs may include experimental medicine studies.

Q: To what extent will the Levelling Up agenda or regional healthcare challenges influence your thinking about potential distribution of MRC CoREs?

A: The process is open to applications from across the UK. This new investment approach will give an exciting opportunity to both refresh and diversify the types of science and health challenges that we pursue through our strategic investments, but also an opportunity to diversify the spread of our investments across the UK and the types of disciplines, science interests and partnerships that we support through those activities.

The articulated challenge will need to be tackled by the right team, in the right environment, with the right capabilities. If there are reasons to host an activity in a particular region because of a local opportunity, that would give a competitive edge to an application.

Consideration should be given to the investment landscape across the UK, but also beyond, to make sure that the challenge is not being addressed elsewhere and that the team is ideally placed to deliver important advances. We hope supporting regional excellence, partnerships and perhaps health questions will help the MRC respond to the levelling-up agenda, where we see a particular opportunity to address health inequality.

Themes

Q: How do you see an area like health inequalities fitting into the focus of the thematic areas?

A: We see a strong opportunity for integrating health inequalities into several challenge areas, either as a major component of the ambition, or as part of an underlying activity. For example, this could be very relevant to the mental health challenge area where we can see regional disparities of mental ill health in deprived areas. More broadly, we expect MRC CoREs to be outward facing and have clear approaches to promote their science and share data, resources or research tools for the benefit of all.

Q: Will thematic areas be repeated in subsequent opportunities?

A: We are only expecting to fund up to two MRC CoREs per round so some of the themes in each round may not be funded. If so, we may well want to revisit that thematic area.

Q: When will you know what the future themes will be?

A: The Major Investments Board (MIB) that oversees the MRC CoREs is considering the future themes and we'll share this as soon as possible.

Funding arrangements

Q: While £3 million per annum is the maximum award, is there scope for smaller, more focussed awards?

A: The £3 million per annum is a guide, and we would be happy to consider applications with a smaller budget. The key consideration is the budget should be tightly aligned with the needs of the science objectives.

Q: Will researchers within an MRC CoRE be eligible to apply for response-mode funding as well?

A: Yes, this is part of the research portfolio approach we expect from the new model.

Application process

Q: Will there be any support for institutions putting in a full application - like a research delivery or networking service?

A: No, we don't have any plans to introduce a design service or fund applicant networking. We expect applicants to be self-organising within their institution and between institutions to pull together the compelling arguments for MRC to invest.

Q: What is the application process for existing MRC Units?

A: Units seeking MRC support beyond the end of their final quinquennial award will need to submit applications under the new MRC CoRE model. Applications will be considered through the same assessment process and on an equal basis with entirely new investments.

Existing Units can apply through the annual opportunities, whether in response to a priority theme or not.

For further information on transitional arrangements for existing MRC Units, please contact CoRE@mrc.ukri.org

Partnerships

Q: As a non-medical school university, how we can engage with this opportunity eg as a partner?

A: There are plenty of successful applicants to MRC that are members of institutions that do not have a medical school. What is critical is ensuring the research team includes the appropriate make-up of skills and experience to address the chosen biomedical/health challenge.

Q: Is there scope for an external organisation to work with an MRC CoRE to create more inclusive participatory population approaches that serve scientists and provide value to under-represented audiences?

A: We would encourage applicants to look for creative new ways to incorporate learning across different partners and communities of practice.

Q: Will shortlisted applications in the first round be advertised for new partners/investigators to apply to join the team?

A: Shortlisted applicants may receive feedback on important aspects of their plans and this may include reference to leadership, skills and partnerships. Such feedback will be on a case-by-case basis. It will be for applicants to self-organise and manage these developments; MRC won't be publicising those that have been shortlisted.

Q: What are your expectations on the level of partnership and industry engagement?

A: We would be very interested to see engagement with industry. We would like to see partnerships developed at multiple levels in line with the needs of the science ambitions. So, that might be building upon an existing relationship with a partner as part of a research activity, or establishing a stronger, more cross-cutting partnership at a thematic level. At the strategic level, we are also open to discussing joint funding/sponsorship opportunities for MRC CoRE investments with partners from both the public and commercial sectors. Feedback from the outline stage for those invited to submit a full application may stimulate applicants to bring in other partners if required.

Q: Is this a UKRI or an MRC-only opportunity?

A: This is a new MRC investment model and will be managed as such. We are keen to explore partnership funding with others in UKRI or elsewhere but at this time the model has not been considered for adoption by UKRI more broadly.

Q: How will the MRC CoREs interface with the NIHR Biomedical Research Centres (BRCs)?

A: If and how new MRC CoRE investments interface with existing centres of excellence (BRCs or otherwise) is a matter for applicants to decide and will be determined by the challenge being pursued and the opportunities for strategic engagement.

Please submit any additional questions to CoRE@mrc.ukri.org