

# EPSRC Strategic Infrastructure Outline Opportunity (Aug 2023)

## Webinar Q&A

This document provides answers to the questions asked at the EPSRC Strategic Infrastructure Outline Opportunity webinar, held on 9th August 2023. Most questions were answered live during the webinar and are repeated in this document. Some questions required further clarifications and could not be answered live are answered here with written responses.

### Opportunity details

1. What are the major differences between this and the previous scheme?

The main difference is that the application platform has changed from Joint Electronic Submissions to the UKRI new Funding Service. This EPSRC Strategic Infrastructure opportunity evolved from the previous Strategic Equipment grant to reflect that both capital and digital infrastructure (not research software) can be requested.

2. If the proposal infrastructure can also be used within the remits of other research councils is this considered positive?

The research enabled by the infrastructure must be within the EPSRC remit as this is not a cross-council funding opportunity. Multidisciplinary proposals are allowed and will be classified within EPSRC once submitted.

3. What are your expectations regarding demand management for this call?

EPSRC expects universities to take a strategic approach to the submission of draft business cases, and prioritising the submissions it makes.

4. How much time will applicants have between being informed of success at outline and the full proposal deadline?

On 15th June, EPSRC published a preannouncement for the outline call for the community's awareness and support your proposal planning. The outline closes on 31st August and the outline panel is around w/c 25th September. Successful outline proposals will be invited to submit full proposal around 3/10/2023 and the full proposal application closes on 1/12/2023.

5. Can you comment on the previous success rate for the scheme?

EPSRC doesn't publish opportunity success rates as a standard practice. For strategic infrastructure opportunity, the sifting rates are higher at the outline and interview panels as compared to the peer review stage.

6. Can the capability for the infrastructure be 'multidisciplinary'? In other words provide research capability for creative arts technology projects?

Research outside EPSRC's remit can be enabled provided that the majority of research enabled (over 50%) is in EPSRC's remit. The proposal focus should be on EPSRC related research.

7. What is the limit of Technology Readiness Level (1-9) do you consider to be in scope for this call? EPSRC's remit is Technology Readiness Levels 1-3.

8. Are you keen to see more digital infrastructure bids if justified?

The scheme always included scope for digital hardware and this new call is providing clarifications on the scope. Digital infrastructure proposals are welcomed where they include equipment such as compute or data storage. Research software is not included in this opportunity

9. For nationally important equipment is it advised to be within roughly £3M?

There is no upper limit for this scheme but we expect applicants to speak to EPSRC research infrastructure team before applying if the proposal is over £3M.

10. If the requested amount is between £5-6M, would this still be the correct funding call?

£5-6M is within the scale of the strategic infrastructure opportunity. The nature of the strategic case of the proposal would dictate which funding opportunity would be most appropriate for it. EPSRC welcomes discussions before submissions if applicants are unsure which funding opportunity is most appropriate.

11. Is there any limit on the provenance/manufacturer location of the equipment though after?

Any proposal must follow UKRI's Trusted Research Guidance (<https://www.ukri.org/publications/ukri-trusted-research-and-innovation-guidance/>) and follow any relevant government legislation for import and export controls such as the National Security and Investment Act.

12. Is there a preference for regional applications due to the levelling up agenda? Or are regional vs national ringfenced?

There isn't a preference between regional or national and they are not ring-fenced.

13. Can we see examples of successful applications?

EPSRC is unable to share successful applications due to general data protection regulation. Summaries of successful applications can be accessed on [EPSRC grants on the web](#) or [UKRI Gateway to Research](#).

14. Are there any net-zero evaluation criteria?

EPSRC is exploring opportunities to bring environmental sustainability to form part of the sustainability assessment criterion for this opportunity.

15. You say that net-zero is not in the criteria, but energy and decarbonisation is one of the EPSRC themes. So it does count, doesn't it?

Energy and Decarbonisation is one of EPSRC's research themes. Under the 'Purpose and vision' assessment criterion, we ask applicants to provide evidence on how the infrastructure sought will align to EPSRC's strategies through [EPSRC research areas](#) and meet [EPSRC's six world-class objectives and eight strategic priorities](#). Net-zero along with all other research areas within EPSRC remit can be articulated under this point. EPSRC expect applicants to ensure that all aspects of their bid are as sustainable as possible, this includes Environmental, Financial, Technical, Staffing and User Base sustainability.

16. It would be great to avoid holiday timelines in future to enable staff with caring responsibilities to become more involved.

The planning for FY 2024/25 and beyond opportunity will avoid holiday periods where possible. However, the process of the opportunity is around 5 months from opening the outline call to closing the full proposal call so there may be holiday periods which are not possible to avoid.

## Submitting an application

17. What type of evidence is expected for user base demand? Will this be done through letters of support? Are these LoS required for the first stage or only full proposal stage?

This will be looked at in the full proposal stage. Further guidance on the full proposal will be published in due course.

18. Do we need to evidence the scale of user demand, i.e. we submitted letters of support from potential users under the JeS version?

The scale of user demand should be provided in the outline proposal, then further elaborated in the full proposal stage. Letters of support are not required at only the full proposal stage.

19. Is the outline proposal still limited to 2 pages as there are different word limit for various sections. In the new funding service EPSRC removed the 2-page business case. Instead, we ask for text input into the four applicant question sections. Word counts are used for each of the applicant questions instead of the page limit. If the maximum word counts are used the length of the outline is largely equivalent to two pages.

20. Is the 31st Aug date submission to EPSRC or approval from host institute?

The date is the deadline of the submission to EPSRC.

21. Is there a template document for the outline application available? This would be useful for researchers, the information is on the webpage but having it in word.

In the new funding service, applicants will use the text box to input the four applicant questions. You can create your own template by copying and pasting the applicant questions from our [funding finder webpage](#) to prepare your outline proposal offline.

22. Do we really need any references added in the reference section?

References aren't mandatory; if you don't have references you can enter N/A.

23. As this is an outline stage, it makes sense to fully explore and confirm opportunities for a broader user base only once a bid is invited to the second stage. Is allowance for this made in the outline assessment, or is there an expectation that the full user base is clearly defined already in the outline. EPSRC encourages that applicants establish the scope and breath of the infrastructure user base at the outline stage. The user base strategy can be updated and elaborated at the full proposal stage but we do not expect to see major changes from the outline proposal.

## Grant Duration

24. I don't think I saw a timeline for deployment if successful. Should this be mentioned in the outline proposal stage. Does all procurement need to be in the financial year of the award?

Deployment timeline should be provided at the outline stage. The grant is not subject to time constraints but should be justified accordingly to the proposal.

25. I have a question on timeframes. Is EPSRC prescriptive on the timeframe that Route 1 should be completed within? This is not clear from the guidelines. Is there a maximum time limit on completion of the infrastructure delivery/commissioning? Or does the time frame just need to be justified?

There are no limits on the duration of funding, but the duration must be justified and must reflect that this is an infrastructure grant and not a research grant.

26. Would you expect the project duration to cover the period of all match commitments? E.g. if the proposal includes warranty/maintenance contract for 5 years, should the duration be e.g. 7 years through to the end of procurement/installation plus initial warranty/cover? Should all institutional

match resourcing committed to the project fall within the scoped project period? (as opposed to some of it coming after the grant officially ends)

Costs for service maintenance contracts may extend beyond the end of the grant. However we expect the cost of these contracts to be paid within the lifetime of the grant.

## Resources and costs

27. Does "resource costs to cover procurement, installation, and initial testing", also include design? Depends on the type of design but if the weight of the design is heavy this may be instrument development instead of strategic infrastructure. Instrument development goes through the EPSRC standard responsive mode route.

28. Under installation costs, what could be covered, for example room setup, extraction fans, air conditioning, laser safety, etc?

29. Could you clarify if we are allowed to ask for a contribution to room redevelopment costs allowing the infrastructure to be installed (e.g. high power electricity points, cooling water) that would not normally be expected in a "standard" well-founded laboratory otherwise.

Laboratory refurbishment/modifications/redevelopment to install equipment is considered a host institution contribution, so would be considered out of scope unless in exceptional circumstances. The exceptional cases would require discussion with EPSRC.

30. Can resources allowed for initial testing include pilot projects to demonstrate the value of the equipment to others to encourage future use?

A small amount of time for pump-priming projects to maximise utilisation of the infrastructure can be requested.

31. If the quote for the equipment includes a year service contract but service for the second year is an extra cost, can this cost be included on the proposal? (you mentioned not replacing service contracts)

If the service contract is included in a quote then that it is considered part of the cost of the equipment and will be funded at 100%. If it is an independent service contract then it is considered a resource cost and will be funded at 80%.

32. In your slide showing all the EPSRC funding mechanisms for equipment, it was mentioned 'up to 100% fEC' against Strategic Infrastructure fund. Could you specify what is eligible for 100% and what is the ratio for the rest please?

You can request funding for up to 100% full economic cost (fEC) of the equipment. Other funding headings would follow the standard fEC levels, i.e., 80% for resource costs.

33. Are we expected to budget outreach costs, e.g., 10% of the total funding?

Impact-related activities and engagement activities are eligible non-capital costs. We do not define the portion of the engagement activities but this has to be justified.

34. No capital > £10k? What about critical equipment to enable use of the main item >£400k

Under Route 1: strategic infrastructure, you can request items of equipment between £10k and £400k that are essential to the running of the larger equipment over £400k.

Under Route 2: resources to support existing research infrastructure does not support capital costs over £10k.

## Staff Time

35. Would it be possible to include personnel time to establish the facility and methods for users, and to run pump-priming projects?

It is possible to include resource costs in the grant proposal. That can include personnel time for setting up the equipment and initial testing.

36. Can we request money for PI and Col time managing the proposed facility? What about money for Pump priming for ECR accessing the facility?

Resource costs can be included in the grant proposal, that includes PI and Col time. The length of the funding can include a small amount of time for pump-priming projects to maximise utilisation of the infrastructure. EPSRC expect applicants and host institutions to have a long-term sustainability plan.

37. Could you please confirm whether experimental officer and PI / Co-lead time can be put on the grant as was allowed for strategic equipment bids?

Experimental officer, PI and Co-lead time are allowed.

38. How much technician (or post-doctoral research) time is allowable for the initial roll out of the facility?

It depends on the role of the technician on the facility. Technician or PDRA time is an eligible cost at 80%fEC provided it is justified and is to support the equipment requested. The staff member's experience and skill set should be appropriate for their role on the project.

## Quotations

39. Do we need to provide three quotations for the same equipment?

Quotations are not required as part of the proposal. If the application is successful post the full proposal interview, 3 quotations will be needed for equipment over £138k at the funding stage. The cost threshold for when quotes are required remains the same (see [Equipment on research grants – UKRI](#)). We still expect a summary of quotes in your justification of resources at full proposal stage.

40. What requirements are there around equipment quotes, business cases, etc, now that this is being run via TFS? Will this be different at the full stage?

Quotes are not required in your application, but we will ask for them after the panel if your proposal is funded. Business cases are no longer required and replaced by the four applicant question sections.

## Individual Eligibility

41. What is the general profile of the proposal team you will be looking for, e.g., a mix of academics and professional services? Do you expect the PI to be academic?

The profile for the proposal team depends on the nature of your proposal and we do not have a standard expectation. All proposals should have an evidenced leadership model to manage the infrastructure and a plan for sustaining the staff on the proposal. The project lead should be the most appropriate person and has to be eligible to apply, this includes Research Technical Professionals.

42. Can ECRs lead and apply for equipment grant?

Yes, if they meet the eligibility criteria.

43. Can a RTP be a project lead?

Yes, an RTP can be a project lead.

## Strategic case

44. I'm not clear what it means by 'strategic'. Does it mean that the equipment shouldn't be existing in other institutions?

The strategy of your proposal does not have to be unique. Applicants can apply for facilities that exist in other institutions but will have to evidence the need for this and how it's enhancing capabilities within the existing landscape.

45. Does the equipment request have to be unique in the UK?

The equipment does not necessarily need to be unique. It can be strategic in other ways - please refer to our website for examples of what is eligible as strategic. However, if other similar instruments are available a clear case needs to be made as to why this is strategically needed.

46. What type of evidence do you look for to demonstrate a strong equipment / facility user case?

At outline stage, it is important applicants address how they will enable transformative research relevant to EPSRC's objectives and research areas. It is not necessary for a proposal to be relevant to all EPSRC's objectives but it should explain which ones it is relevant to and how it supports them. A strong user base should focus on a high quality case instead of the quantity of users.

## Host institution contributions

47. Can you clarify the expectation from the host institution on institutional contributions? Is there an expectation around % of contributions?

Due to the breadth of proposals that we receive, we do not quantify the expectation of the contribution. The nature and level of contribution will be reviewed for each proposal. Contributions from the host institutions would be expected to be in line with the scale of the proposal. The host institution should demonstrate the strategic importance and commitment to the proposed infrastructure.

48. Would the institutional contribution be a defining factor in success. i.e. 2 bids equally scored but one has a higher institutional contribution?

EPSRC does not decide between similar quality proposals based on the size of the host institution contribution. The host institution contribution will be taken into account when assessing the importance of the infrastructure to the host institution, the plans for sustainability and how the equipment will be managed.

49. Given the financial pressures currently impacting institutions due to inflation it is much more helpful if some form of expectation from the funder is provided. Otherwise, institutions are guessing at the expectation and what reviewers/panel members and funders want. EPSRC quarterly briefings have repeatedly told institutions that if there is no specific requirement then match does not have to be provided and won't make a difference. The previous answer says you will be reviewing it and thus it will have an impact for this scheme. If it will have an impact then more specific guidance should be provided.

At the outline stage, panellists are informed that host institution contributions are not mandatory and are asked to be mindful of the economic climate when discussing host institution contributions.

Further guidance will be available at the full proposal call on EPSRC's expectation of host institution contributions. A host institution contribution does not need to be match funding. In-kind investigator time, research technical professional training, refurbishment costs etc are also valued by reviewers or panellists. The key is to evidence how the host institution will support the team to meet the proposal objectives and ensure sustainability of the infrastructure.



## Project Partners

50. Are there any restrictions on whether collaborating partners can be international or should only be national?

Project partners can be international or national level. These should follow UKRI's Trusted Research guidelines.

51. Can we involve international partners, e.g. for staff exchanges and training on the equipment through strategic international partnerships?

International project partners can be included where they follow UKRI's Trusted Research guidelines.

## Equipment sharing

52. Can you please explain what is meant by 'shared' infrastructure, are we encouraged to submit joint applications with other universities or provide letters of support from other research institutions? EPSRC wishes to encourage a culture of infrastructure sharing where appropriate to maximise usage within the research group, across institutions or across the UK. As such, strategic infrastructure should account for the local, regional and national pictures, both in terms of equipment available and research being undertaken.

## Application Route 2: resources to support existing strategic infrastructure

53. How do you get invited for future rounds for route 2 investment?

You should identify which [EPSRC theme](#) matches your proposal closest and contact one of the EPSRC theme contacts (listed [on this page of the UKRI website](#)). They will arrange a meeting to discuss your proposal further. If you don't know which theme your proposal fits best under, you can contact the Research Infrastructure theme and we will put you in contact with the most appropriate person. You should provide an idea of the strategic need for the resource application, what the cost and resources of the proposal would be, what research will be enabled and sustainability plans.

## The Funding Service operations and policies

TFS operational questions at platform level should be referred to the TFS IT helpdesk

Email: [support@funding-service.ukri.org](mailto:support@funding-service.ukri.org)

Telephone: 01793 547490

EPSRC policy related TFS questions should be referred to the business improvement team

Email: [epsrcpeerreviewpolicy@epsrc.ukri.org](mailto:epsrcpeerreviewpolicy@epsrc.ukri.org)

## Future calls

54. Can you confirm the frequency of this call in the future? When will the next rounds be?

The next deadline will be 31 August 2023 at 4pm UK time. From financial year 2024/25, we will be running the Strategic Infrastructure Opportunity on TFS twice a year. The plan on the time period for each call is yet to be confirmed. We expect the next outline call to be around early 2024.

55. This call's deadline is really tight. Would that be possible to extend it, as many research officers are on annual leave too.

On 15th June, we published a pre-announcement with the opening and closing dates of the call prior to the call opening. The pre-announcement was to raise community's awareness and support your proposal planning accordingly. We will not extend the call deadline. However, there will be future rounds of this call should you be unable to submit a proposal this time around.

56. If the original white paper for the current deadline of August 31 does not go on to the next phase, will we be allowed to improve and re-submit on the next round?

At the outline stage, proposals can be invited for resubmission if they meet most of the assessment criteria and the weakness can be addressed at the resubmission.

57. If unsuccessful this round, does that affect any reapplications in later rounds?

Unsuccessful outlines can be submitted to future rounds providing they meet most of the assessment criteria. You will be expected to address any feedback provided from the previous submission.