

EPSRC Strategic Infrastructure Webinar Q&A – June 2024

This document collates answers to the questions asked at the EPSRC Strategic Infrastructure Outline webinars, held in June 2024.

Completing an Application

1. With regards to Research Involving Human Subjects—is there an expectation that ethics approval will already be in place by August 20th, or would it be sufficient to argue that eventual approval is very likely considering for instance that we secured approval for similar experiments in the past? If the latter, will assessors be aware of that?

If this affects your application then you should contact us directly; As a general guidance all applications must follow [UKRI's guidance on legislation on human participants in research](#).

Ethics and RRI is not an assessed criteria for this funding opportunity, but we will expect this to be covered appropriately before grants are authorised.

2. What is expected in a cost recovery model? Is recovery of ongoing operational and maintenance costs sufficient, or do you expect recovery of future replacement capital costs?

The cost recovery model comes under the financial sustainability lens. We recognise the breadth of infrastructure applications we receive, so we don't quantify what kind of model you should be using.

Every individual application should have an effective cost recovery model of its own so it can be tailored to the specific infrastructure in a unique setting. The cost recovery model should be looping into the ongoing operational maintenance on and beyond the grant duration, but also the nature of the infrastructure. As the grant time evolves the research enabled by it will be shifting as well. During the peer review and interview process, it will be considered a positive if you have considered the long-term sustainability of the capital cost as well.

3. What is the maximum length of the infrastructure project? We may need to construct a purpose-built lab for this, which will require time.

There are two routes for this opportunity. For the first route, which focuses on capital infrastructure, we don't have a cap on the duration of the grant as long as the duration of the grant is justified. Grants submitted through route one are for the procurement and setup of the equipment instead of doing research, so the duration should reflect this.

For the second route which is the resources only route, we don't expect the grant to be longer than two years.

4. Do we need to include equipment quotes from manufacturers and if so, how many?

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.

5. I note the comment about not funding software. To handle applications for time on the facility, including prioritisation, sample tracking, data handling and dissemination tracking, we would like to develop our own software, in particular in collaboration with our EDI department to ensure a

high-quality experience for all applicants. We can develop this in-house at no cost, but it likely requires additional licencing requirements (for the duration of the infrastructure grant) over and above our institutional default. Can I include these costs explicitly on our application or would these have to fall under an institutional commitment? The latter would seem a bit odd to me as they would be an ongoing cost that we would look to recover as part of sustainable operation (in due course).

Note the scheme is a capital focused call. The reason we have a line about not claiming software is because we don't want applications for software as a capital cost. However, if software is needed to support a piece of capital infrastructure and this was justified in the justification of resources, this would be eligible provided it was solely to support this infrastructure.

6. Will the non-assessed application questions (Summary, RRI, Data management) be seen by reviewers and panellists, or only by EPSRC?

The non-assessed questions will be visible to reviewers and panellists as well as EPSRC staff, but they will be asked not to assess these sections.

7. We would like to have a PDRA who will work on method development with the novel equipment we are requesting. What are EPSRC's views on the boundary between this type of work, versus a research project?

We wouldn't expect to see PDRAs on the grant except for setting up equipment or doing initial pump priming projects which we would expect to have been covered at the outline stage. We can fund a small amount of pump-priming but this will have to be limited in scope, for example under six months, and we would expect to see project lead time going towards it.

8. How much longer can the duration be in the full stage in comparison to outline? We may need more time to build a required lab than expected.

There shouldn't be a duration difference between the outline and full proposal stage.

There isn't a cap on the duration of the grant, but the duration should reflect that this is an infrastructure grant rather than a research project.

9. You allow "a small amount of time for pump-priming projects" - what are your limits/expectations about this? Can consumables for these be included?

It's more around exploring the additional capability rather than doing a specific research project. Consumables can be requested if it's justified that it is supporting pump-priming or the setup for procurement of the infrastructure. We expect pump-priming costs to have been covered in the outline proposal.

10. For multi-institutional bids should both universities name a contact within the 'your organisation's support' section?

In the Funding Service it's only possible to name one lead institution at the moment, so we only expect one institution to be covered in the host organisation support. We advise that if there are multiple institutions, you look at the scope and strategy and the purpose to choose a lead institution as the host.

This doesn't prevent you discussing contributions from other institutions involved in your application, but there may be more appropriate sections to discuss this.

11. Could costs for training staff to use the new equipment be added to the infrastructure route funding?

Staff training is considered a valid non-capital cost for route one.

EDI Accessibility Plan

12. What do we do about controlled environments like clean rooms where H&S precludes, for example, access for wheelchairs?

We have seen laboratories which provide wheelchairs inside the controlled environment to overcome this.

13. Is menopause medically recognised as a 'disability'?

The UK has a legal definition of a disability, which is any condition that lasts for 12 months or more and has a substantial impact on day-to-day life including work. There have been legal cases where menopause has been recognised as a disability.

We'd encourage people not to think about this from a medical perspective, as our perspective is on the social model of removing barriers to enable access for everyone rather than trying to remove or eradicate disability.

14. Institutions normally already have accessibility plans and monitoring of them organisation wide. What do you expect applicants to implement beyond their institution's existing work and policies?

It is likely the institution's approach is very broad and probably does not account for local and more nuanced contexts. Applicants can consider the institutional approach but show how that will be extended to fit the local setting. It may be the case that any good practice could go on to shape institutional policy and practice on such matters.

Katherine Deane at UEA has written some useful access guidelines for different types of areas: <https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/projects/access-all-areas-in-labs/access-guidelines>

This is an opportunity to show best practice. During the last REF, the EDI Panel highlighted considerable gaps in institutional support for disabled people.

We also understand that everyone will be starting at different places in their knowledge and availability of accessible practices, so what we're looking for is to show how you will establish, monitor, maintain/improve and report on accessibility over the lifetime of the grant.

Letters of support

15. Where in the proposal should letters of support from users/partners who DO NOT have a contribution to make to the costings be included?

The organisation would be considered a project partner if they were providing in-kind or cash support to the project but not receiving funds for it, otherwise their letter should go in the purpose section as users. <https://www.ukri.org/councils/epsrc/guidance-for-applicants/what-to-include-in-your-proposal/project-partners-letter-of-support/>

16. Should the letter of support from the host institution be included in the project partner section as well as in the organisation's support? Should these be the same or can one complement the other?

Host institutions do not need to provide a project partner letter of support, the host organisation support should be covered in the relevant section of the application form.

17. Would a letter of support from an existing advisory board go in the project partners section? I suppose they provide an in-kind contribution in the form of their time and peer review.

If an individual advisory board member is providing an in-kind contribution such as staff time we would advise this go in the project partner section but it would depend on what the contribution is and the nature of the advisory board.

This page on the EPSRC website includes information on who can and can't be a project partner: [Project partners letter of support – UKRI](#). If you still have questions, please feel free to contact the Research Infrastructure theme.

18. Do proposals requesting funding >£3m need to be discussed with you again at this stage (after having passed the outline stage)?

If we've had a conversation about your proposal at the outline stage then we won't need an additional meeting at the full proposal stage for the grant value again. However if the cost of your proposal changes by more than 10% from what was proposed at the outline stage you should contact us in advance as this helps us manage our budget.

19. With regards to the +-10% maximum cost difference between outline and full proposal—does that refer to the entire grant value or only to the Equipment entry (Exception; 100% FEC)?

It refers to the entire grant value.

Host Institution Contributions

20. What are the expectations for cash match on applications? The guidance is quite vague and my institution is reluctant to provide cash match without a clear requirement from the funder. Does this put me at a disadvantage?

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

21. Does EPSRC consider in-kind/cash contribution from project partners in the same way they do for standard research grants? In other words, is there the same type of expectation that partners provide a significant contribution to show their support of the infrastructure?

Expectations surrounding project partner contributions will be different from standard responsive mode, because the applications are for research infrastructure and not for a research project. Your contribution, whether cash or in-kind, should be tailored and effective to the application rather than thinking about the value.

22. What does "Contributions from the host organisation would be expected to be in line with the scale of the proposal" mean in one of the answers to a previous question. Can you provide additional guidance on what is typical? e.g. Would you expect to see 10% contribution from the host/partners on bids above a certain value? Greater clarity would be very helpful.

We recognise the diverse range of applications we receive under this scheme, and hence we have not quantified the percentage or proportion of contribution we expect to see from the host institution or project partners. I think the key to consider when you are thinking about the host

contribution is that it doesn't have to be cash. In-kind contributions are also valuable and are considered at peer review and interview stages. From EPSRC's point of view we would expect the institution to show how it will support the applicant team as well as how they have been looking into the application. For example, in the assessment criteria under Purpose we look into how the proposal aligns with the host institutional strategy. The contribution should also reflect and demonstrate that the infrastructure requested is a strategic necessity instead of a "nice to have."

23. If the infrastructure supplier has offered to discount the price to funder of the infrastructure should this be specifically acknowledged as a contribution from them, or just considered as the quoted price?

It should be reflected in the quote but doesn't need to be acknowledged as a contribution.

24. Where should the cash contribution from the host organisation go in the UKRI Funding Service (TFS)?

If the cash contribution is towards the equipment, we want you to enter the value of your quote in the costs table on the UKRI funding service and then in the justification of resources you should cover what the cost to EPSRC is and what the host institution contribution is.

If the cash contribution is towards resources, then you don't need to cover this in the costs table.

25. Note that more than 50+ UK universities are running redundancy schemes to weather the financial storm, the institutional contribution for these bids in 2024 will be affected due to tough financial climate. How will the panel consider this? Not all universities will face similar challenges widening inequality even further.

We recognise the financial challenges that universities are facing, and at both peer review and interview panel assessment stages we let the assessors know what the current challenges are.

We are looking for evidence of how the university sees the proposal as a strategic necessity and how it is complementing and enhancing the institutional strategy as well. All panels when assessing proposals look at what is reasonable for the host organisation to support just like they would when looking at career stage.

Contributions do not need to be cash and in-kind contributions are valid and valued by assessors too.

26. Where should the cash from the host institution for building a lab go in TFS?

It should be mentioned in the justification of resources.

27. If our host institution wants to commit much more funds than in the Outline, should we contact you also?

As long as the cost of the proposal remains within +/- 10% of the outline you don't need to contact us.

Success Rates

28. How many bids are invited to the full proposal stage in this round? What's the total pot of funding for November panel?

EPSRC don't disclose the number of bids that are going to panels. There is around £60 million for World Class Labs across the year; we balance this across the schemes we support depending on the quality of the applications we receive.

29. What percentage of the applications that reached this stage were eventually approved in the previous rounds?

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.

We should mention that in the last two rounds we have seen an increase in the volume of applications, so the success rate in the last two rounds will be lower compared to previous rounds.

30. What do you mean by "sifting rates" in your response to the question about success rates?

When we talk about sifting rates, we're talking about the proposals that are not successful in proceeding from the outline stage to the full proposal stage.

Expert Review and Interviews

31. Will interviews be in-person or online? People in my team have mobility problems which make in-person difficult.

The next round of interviews will be online. In the past interviews have been taken place in-person but we have been hosting interviews online for the last two years.

Please do let us know if you need any additional reasonable adjustments as part of the application or interview process: <https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-to-apply/disability-and-accessibility-support-for-ukri-applicants-and-grant-holders/>

32. How many people are expected to be in our interview team?

We usually expect three people in the interview team. We'll provide more details on who to include in your team once invitations to interview are confirmed.

We usually recommend that the project lead attends and that there is a representative from your institution who can cover the host institution's contribution to the project. Sometimes there is also a key user of the equipment but we are quite flexible in terms of who can be at the interview.

Outline Resubmission

33. Have outline proposals that are rejected all been informed? Have the reject outlines outcome answers been directly sent out to the PI or the institution?

Yes, all applicants have been informed the outcome.

34. Looking to the next outline call, which will be open - will there still be a quota/expectation of no more than 3 bids per HEI, and if so over what period of time?

We are looking into our wider strategy in terms of the scheme; until we have an outcome from that review we don't have plans to change our current approach to institutional limits.

EPSRC expects institutions to take a strong strategic approach to prioritise the applications that are of the highest strategic importance to the institutions. The applications made should not be

considered as 'nice to have' infrastructure, but rather a strategic necessity for the host institution's long-term strategy.

EPSRC expects no more than six applications from each institution in the period between June 2024 and June 2025. Additional applications from the same institution will automatically be rejected. This institution limit applies to both the invited re-submissions and the resources to support existing strategic infrastructure route.

The institutional limit should not be seen as a target by institutions. EPSRC usually receive less than six applications from most institutions at each financial year. Applications should only be submitted when they have fully addressed the assessment criteria and reflected as an institutional priority.

35. Will the limit of 6 applications/year for institutions be made clear in the guidance. The 3 applications per round limit was initially only hidden away in the Q&A doc from a previous webinar.

There were a number of communication routes we used for the previous round, but we've taken on feedback that this wasn't necessarily as clear as we would have liked, and we know that some people only saw it in the Q&A. So going forward, we will be more explicit and the guidance will be included on the [Funding Finder page](#), but we will go through our usual communication routes on top of that.

This will be made clear through the meetings our senior leaders have with strategic universities and through any engagements we have within the community as well.

36. Will invited resubmissions count towards an HEI quota?

EPSRC expects no more than six applications from each institution in the period between June 2024 and June 2025. Additional applications from the same institution will automatically be rejected. This institution limit applies to both the invited re-submissions and the resources to support existing strategic infrastructure route.

37. In the previous webinar you mentioned about a difference between Low Priority and High Priority proposals. Could you please clarify that one more time? Does the feedback to the successful outline applicants get informed whether their proposal was ranked low or high priority?

We aren't informing successful or unsuccessful applicants of their score at the outline stage. Some applications who have been unsuccessful and not invited to submit a full proposal will receive an email from us asking you to resubmit your outline again at the next outline stage which will open soon. These will receive feedback as they have scored high enough that EPSRC considers them a priority to see again.

Some unsuccessful applicants won't receive further communication from us as we don't consider these proposals a priority for resubmission.

38. You had a slide stating that at Score 5 "Invite to submit a full proposal as a high priority" if the proposal meets all the assessment criteria. At score 4 "Invite to submit a full proposal as a low priority" if they meet most of the assessment criteria. Score 3 and below were not invited. Are low-priority and high-priority proposals treated differently at the next stage?

For proposals scoring 4 or 5 that are invited to submit a full proposal, these are treated equally at the full proposal stage, so you will all be started from the same platform.

Other

39. Will it be possible to obtain a copy of this slide pack and the FAQ document?

Yes, we will share the presentation slides, as well as a link to the webinar recording after the webinar and an FAQ document.