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Research Council

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Welcome

BBSRC Pioneer Awards 2025/26: bioscience discovery research

Webinar will start shortly

Announcement

During the webinar it was highlighted that the distributed peer review (DPR) period coincides with the Easter holidays. In response to this feedback, we have extended the DPR deadline by one week.

The new deadline for DPR is 12 April 2026.

We apologise for the oversight and appreciate your understanding.

Introductions

Panellists

- **Chrysanthi Michelaki**
Senior Portfolio Manager – Rules of Life
- **Laurie O'Neill**
Portfolio Manager – Rules of Life
- **Peter Burlinson**
Head of Strategy – Rules of Life
- **Ruth Betterton**
Senior Portfolio Manager – R&I Funding delivery
- **Cillian Brophy**
UKRI Metascience team
- **Lucy Gresley**
UKRI Metascience team



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Contact details:

pioneerawards@bbsrc.ukri.org



Agenda

1 Pioneer Awards 2025/26

Early-stage bioscience discovery research

Strategic background, aims & scope; what we are looking for

2 What makes a good application

Characteristics of successful & unsuccessful applications

Support for risk

3 Stage One: Registration

How to register and how BBSRC will assess registrations

4 Stage two: Full application

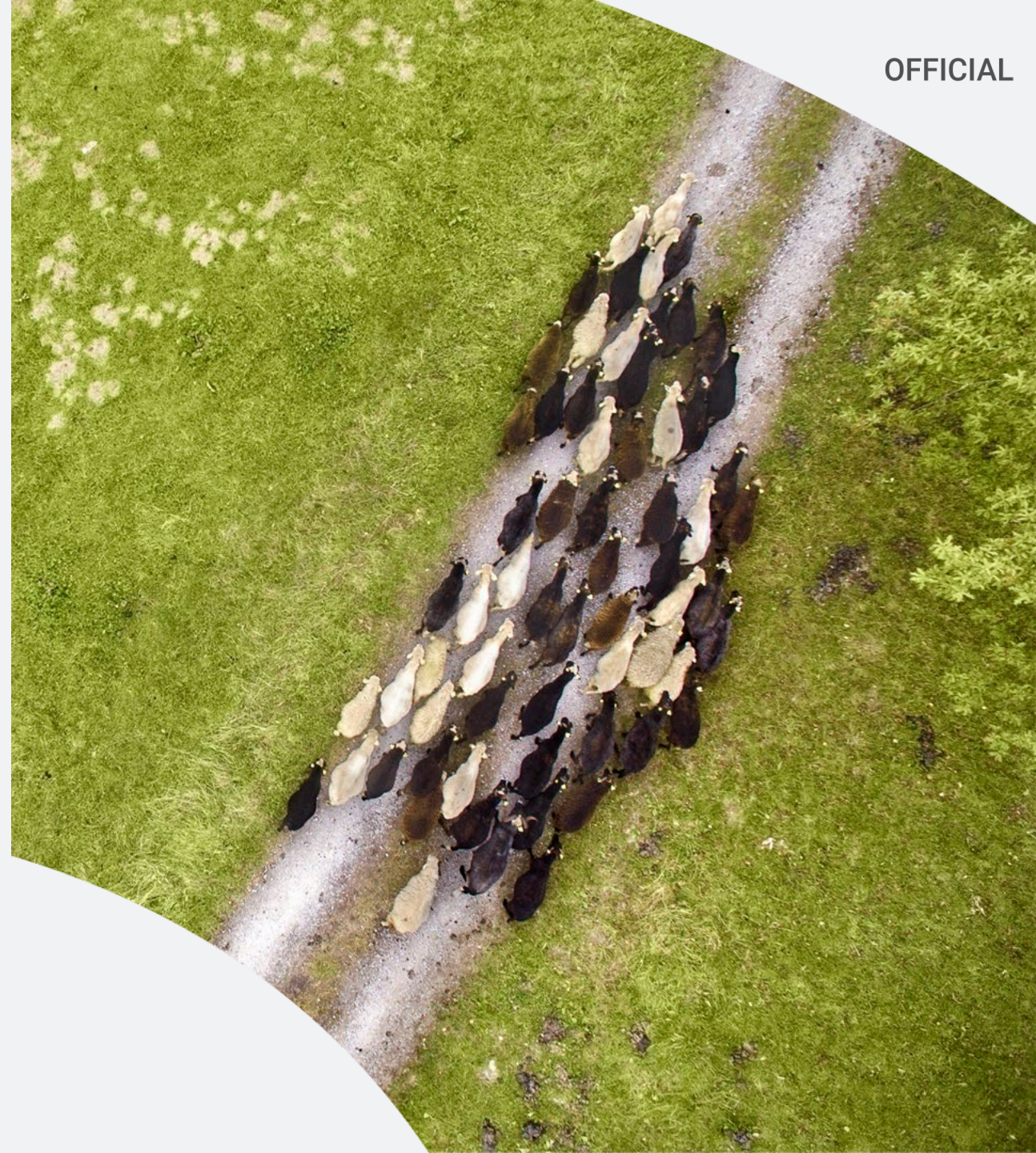
How to apply and full application assessment process

Distributed Peer Review (DPR)

5 Q&A

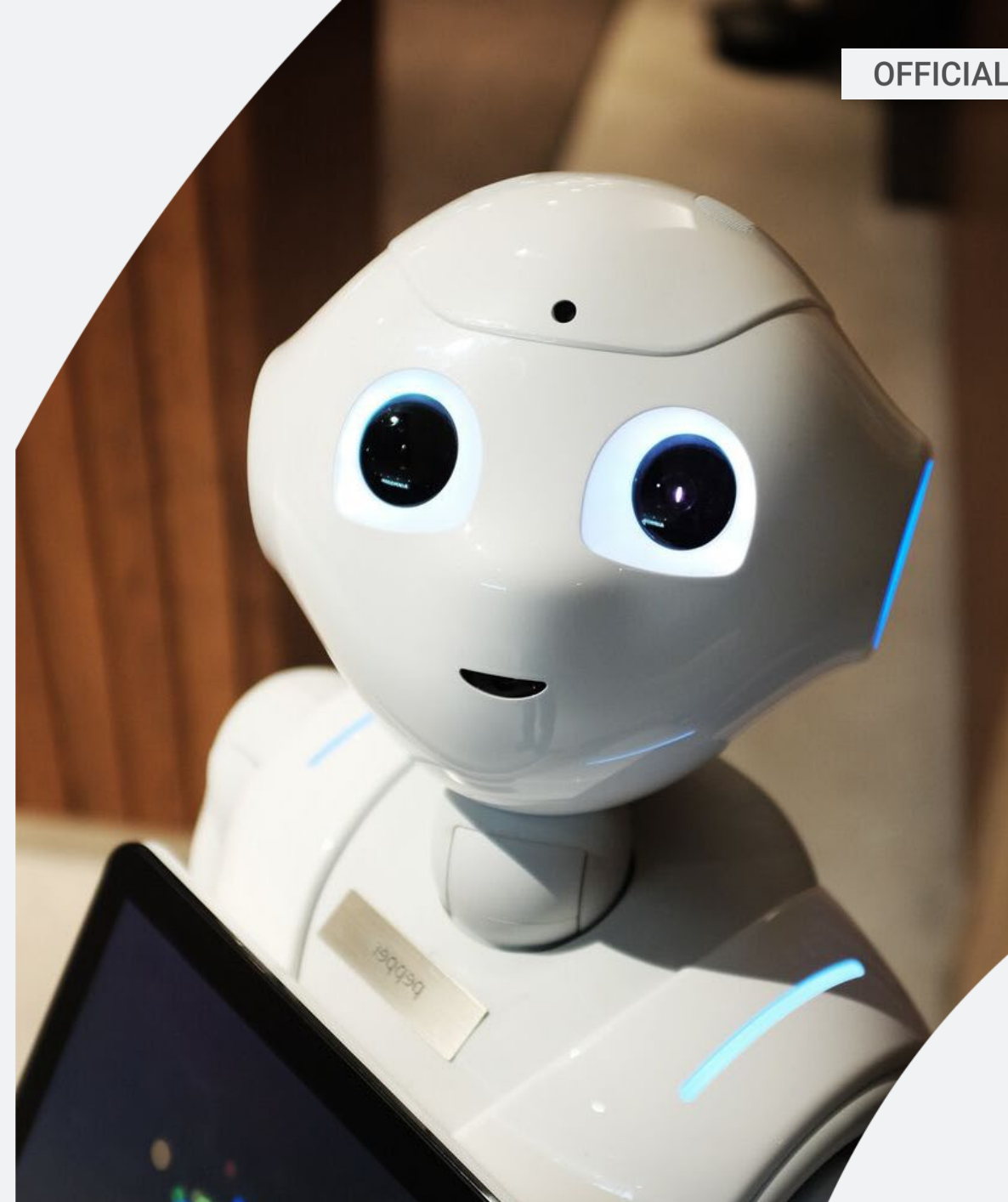


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Technical notes

- By default, all attendees are muted, and video is turned off
- Submit any questions as they arise via the Q&A function
- Please only use the chat function for any technical assistance, bearing in mind that your name might be visible in the chat
- This webinar is being recorded. Video and slides will be shared on [BBSRC Pioneer Awards 2025/26](#)



Questions

- During the webinar, submit any questions via the Q&A function
- At any time, submit any questions to pioneerawards@bbsrc.ukri.org
- Detailed questions which are unlikely to be relevant to other attendees should also be sent to the Pioneer inbox
- Questions about the UKRI Funding Service system should be emailed directly to support@funding-service.ukri.org
- For help and advice on costings and writing your application please contact your research office



Pioneer Awards 2025/26

Early-stage bioscience discovery research

Applications should open **novel adventurous research avenues** with the potential to **transform our fundamental understanding of living systems**

Your research project must:

- be early-stage fundamental bioscience lacking preliminary data
- explore visionary and untested ideas
- have the potential to open new research paradigms in the longer-term

P I O N E E R

[pī-ə-'nir] noun

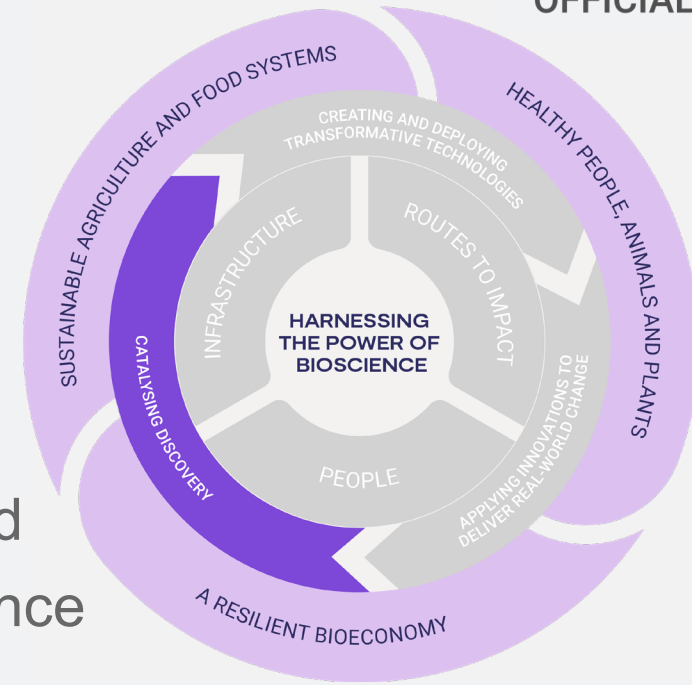
Someone who does what's never been done before, creates new paths of breakthrough and paves the way for generations to follow.

Pioneer Awards 2025/26

Strategic background

The refreshed Forward Look for UK Bioscience articulates BBSRC's ambition to catalyse discovery

- Empowering researchers to follow their ideas wherever they lead
- Recognising the transformative potential of fundamental bioscience
- Laying the foundation for discoveries of far-reaching and lasting significance
- Delivering conceptual advances and fundamental understanding of biological systems ('Rules of Life')



**High-quality research that makes conceptual advances
that unlock the transformative power of discovery**

Pioneer Awards 2025/26

Aim

- Support excellent, original, and potentially transformative discovery research that is at an early stage of development
- Encourage greater tolerance for risk
- Reduce expectation for preliminary data
- Stimulate creativity

Scope

- Focus on BBSRC's understanding the rules of life theme, opening new research directions relevant to fundamental bioscience questions
- Represent a significant departure from existing lines of investigation or introduce an entirely new line of inquiry
- Demonstrate potential to substantially shift current and future thinking about an important topic

Pioneer Awards 2025/26

Who is eligible to apply

- Two **mandatory** stages: registrations and full applications
- Standard BBSRC eligibility criteria – [Guidance for applicants](#)
- One application per project lead, no limit for co-leads
- Project leads or co-leads based outside the UK are not permitted
- No uninvited [resubmissions](#)



Pioneer Awards 2025/26

Resources available

- The full economic cost of your project can be **up to £350,000**
- BBSRC will fund 80% of the FEC (that is, £280,000)
- Projects can last **up to 2 years** (3 in exceptional circumstances with BBSRC pre-approval)
- The total budget is £5 million.

We anticipate awarding 18-20 grants



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Pioneer Awards 2025/26

Institutional prioritisation

- No fixed caps on proposal numbers
- Institutional prioritisation strongly recommended- factoring realistic success rates
- Quality assurance that submitted applications are truly **competitive** and **suitable for the opportunity**
- Consider scope, assessment criteria, and EDI
- Equality, diversity and inclusion commitment for all
- UKRI can offer disability and accessibility support for applicants and grant holders during the application and assessment process



Pioneer Awards 2025/26

Your research project

- should be original and visionary, challenging current thinking and paradigms
- must focus on exploring and revealing novel insights and theories relating to our fundamental understanding of biological systems
- must be early stage and untested, lacking preliminary data and perhaps involving creative or unconventional approaches to the research challenge
- may involve a high level of uncertainty or require a range of exploratory investigations, such that while there are clear aims to explore, the outcomes are neither predictable nor guaranteed
- can involve any combination of experimental, analytical and theoretical work, potentially crossing disciplinary boundaries, including non-bioscience fields



What makes a good application

What we will fund



High-potential early-stage research ideas

- discoveries that challenge or upend current thinking
- unconventional ideas at disciplinary interfaces
- novel research paradigms with longer-term potential
- proof-of-principle studies
- feasibility assessments of new approaches



Able to deliver distinctive outcomes

- unique training environments
- new cross-disciplinary collaboration
- key lessons from negative results or disproved theories



What makes a good application

What we will not fund

- 👉 **Research projects out of remit or scope**
- 👉 **Proposals with incremental or applied focus**
 - direct follow-on work from established discoveries
 - industry-led or user-driven challenges (e.g. SDGs)
- 👉 **Methodological or technology developments**
 - not inspired by a biological problem relevant to BBSRC's understanding the rules of life theme
- 👉 **Anything that is not a research grant**
 - networks, studentships, fellowships, equipment purchase, instrument access, infrastructure, or training



What makes a good application?

High tolerance for risk if you have clearly thought about it

Demonstrate broad feasibility and describe the learning potential of negative results

	Successful applications	Unsuccessful applications
Project design	• opportunities for discovery • originality of question and line of investigation	• incremental or no conceptual advancement • proposed approach is unsuitable • did not set wider context for the project
Feasibility	• risks identified, potential mitigations, or alternative strategies considered • no need to mitigate every risk, but identify them	• clear issues overlooked or not addressed • project lacks element of risk and uncertainty
Preliminary data	• early stage, high potential projects where an exploratory approach is valid	• too much preliminary data- not early stage • a very simple/ basic piece of evidence was lacking
Capability to deliver	• Team is capable or, if gaps, capability could be built or easily acquired during the project	• clear gaps or foreseeable problems in relation to delivering the project

What makes a good application?

Common weaknesses and strengths in the pilot scheme

High-ranking applications

“Identified an important or exciting question, that if addressed could be transformative”

- Multidisciplinary projects
- Potential for large / wide impact
- Clearly addressed the scope
- Use of interesting new methodology
- Risk mitigation strategies
- Potential for new knowledge even if the proposal fails

Mid-ranking applications

- Novel mostly in the application of new technology rather than conceptually
- Very niche and system-dependent
- Poor ‘Rules of Life’ fit: lacked explanation of why the work would have wider repercussions and longer-term relevance or importance in the field

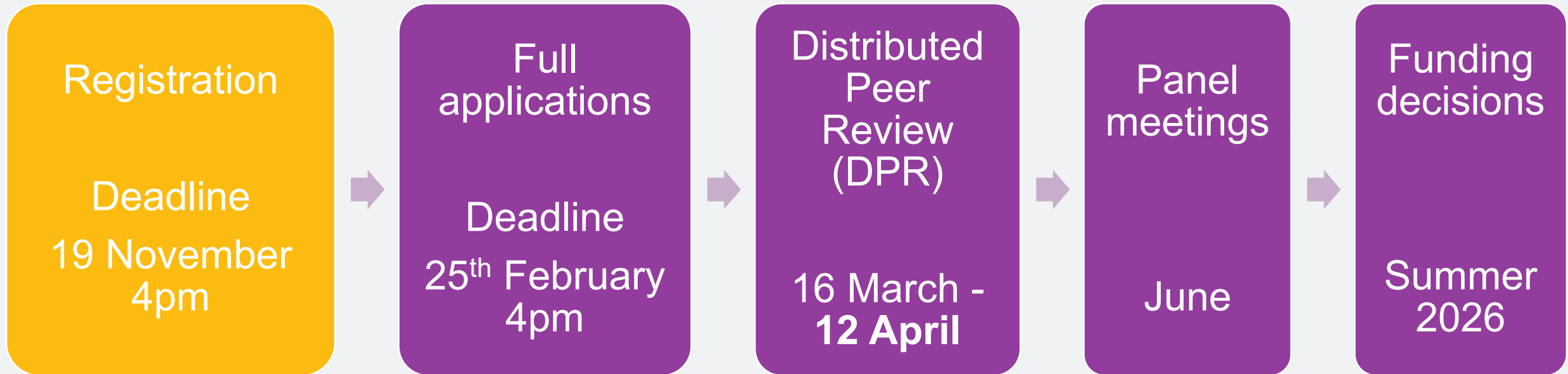
Low-ranking applications

“Represented an incremental advance”

- Major flaws identified
- Lacked scientific context / literature strength
- Did not address the scope
- Not early stage
- 3-year grants shoehorned into a 2-year format
- No preliminary evidence - but it would be easy to find
- Focus of method without explaining the scientific issue

Application and assessment process

Overview



Stage One: Registration

Mandatory Registrations
24 September 9:00am - 19 November 4:00 pm UK time

How to register

Aim of the registration

- ensure proposals are appropriately targeted to this funding opportunity
- provide an early indication of the level of demand, team composition, research areas

Assessment areas

- **Core team** list the anticipated key members of your team
- **Keywords [up to 5]** concisely encapsulating the core ideas and topics within your proposed research project
- **Vision [300 words]** What are you hoping to achieve with your proposed work?
 - ✓ context of the work
 - ✓ the overall goal
 - ✓ potential outcomes
 - ✓ fit to remit and scope

Stage One: Registration

Assessment process

- reviewed by BBSRC
- ensure fit to remit and scope
- feedback within 2 weeks
- recommendation on suitability
- minor changes permitted



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Stage two: Full applications

How to apply

Assessment areas

Full applications

20 November 9:00am - 25 February 4:00 pm UK time

- **Summary [550 words]** to identify the most suitable experts for your application
- **Vision [1,200 words]** What are you hoping to achieve with your proposed work?
- **Approach [1,500 words]** How are you going to deliver your proposed work?
- **Applicant and team capability to deliver [1,650 words]** Why are you the right individual, or team, to successfully deliver the proposed work?
- **Ethics and responsible research and innovation (RRI) [500 words]** What are the ethical or RRI implications and issues relating to the proposed work?
- **Resources and cost justification [1,000 words]** What will you need to deliver your proposed work and how much will it cost?

Sections in TFS have specific sub-prompts – please read these carefully

Stage two: Full applications

Assessment process

Examination by BBSRC

- to ensure fit to remit and scope
- unsuitable applications rejected

Examination
25 February - 13 March

Preliminary assessment via Distributed Peer Review

- to prioritise a subset of proposals (90-120) for full assessment
- only summary and vision sections
- there will be no applicant response – feedback only

DPR
16 March - 12 April

Full assessment by expert panels

- all sections of prioritised applications will be assessed
- no applicant involvement

Panel assessment
27 April - 29 May

Stage two: Full applications

DPR**16 March - 12 April**

What is Distributed Peer Review?

- Applicants (project leads) are also assessors and will review other proposals
- Each Project lead will be asked to review 6-8 applications (only the Summary and Vision sections)
- Conflicts of interest will be declared as usual
- Completing your allocated reviews is a requirement of the selection process

By applying, you are agreeing to act as reviewers and to have your proposal reviewed by your peers

Please do not apply for this opportunity if you would prefer not to take part in DPR



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Stage two: Full applications

Preliminary assessment via Distributed Peer Review

Aim

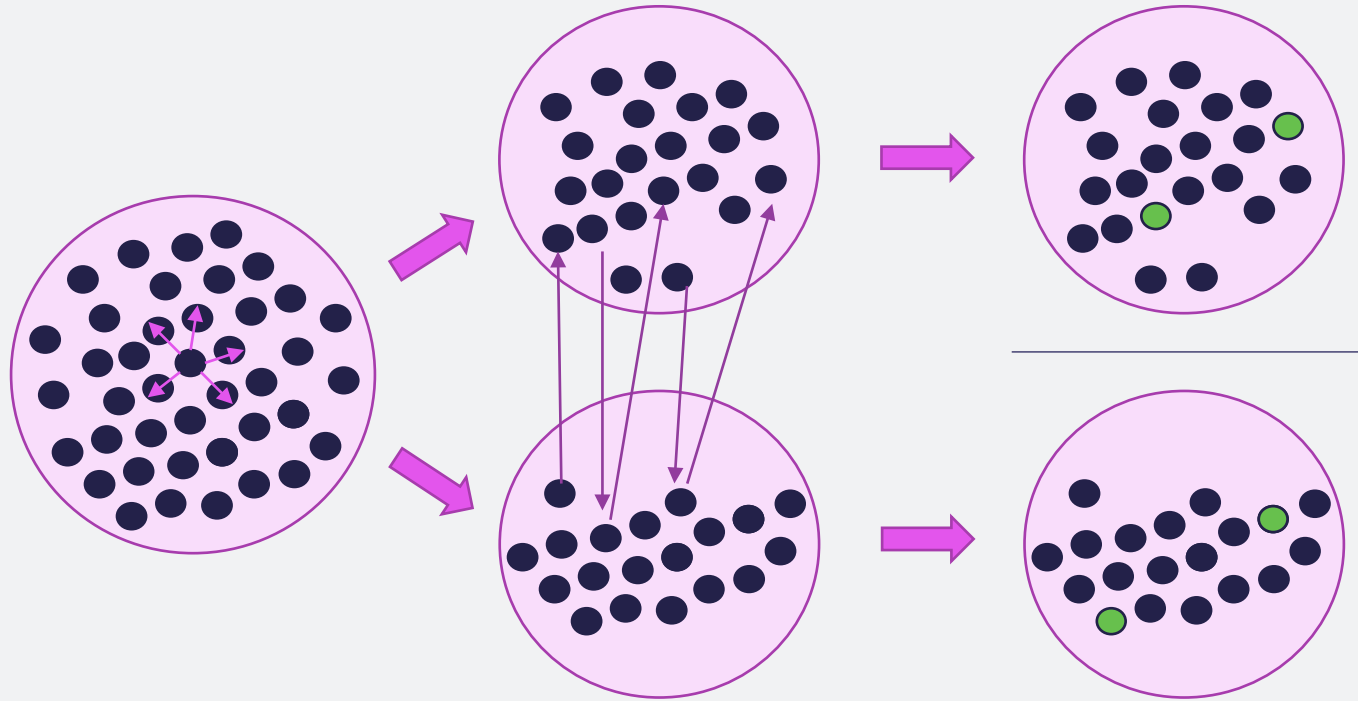
- prioritise ideas that ‘stand out’ – genuinely high potential/ strong fit to Pioneers
- keep the full assessment stage at a manageable level
- retain robust interactive panel-based assessment at the final stage

Why Distributed Peer Review?

- allows more diverse perspectives and expertise at first stage of assessment
- more rapid than traditional external reviewing approaches
- as applicants, assessors already understand the context of the call
- it's a method that scales with the number of applications

Stage two: Full applications

How does Distributed Peer Review work?



Multiple application
pools created

- Proposals are selected for the final stage **within** each pool based on quality
- Partial randomisation may be employed in selection

Safeguards:

- Standard conflict of interest checks
- No reciprocal reviewing between applicants
- Any under/over scoring will have no bearing on your proposal's chances
- Chairs as independent moderators
- Examine applications with divergent scores

Stage two: Full applications

Distributed Peer Review details

Our expectation of reviewers:

- **Only** review the Summary and Vision
- Give a score and justification for each proposal you are assigned (about 6 to 8 proposals)
- Applicants must take part in peer review – **guidance will be provided**
- Failure to complete reviews will result in rejection of your application
- Consistently poor-quality/ unjustified reviews or evidence of malpractice will result in rejection of your application
- Applications not prioritised at this stage will not be subject to BBSRC's resubmission policy.

Stage two: Full applications

Full assessment by expert panels

Panel assessment
27 April - 29 May

Panel Review

- Independent reviews by expert panellists
- Whole application assessed
- Panel agree consensus scores
- No applicants on the panel

Assessment Process

Funding Decisions

Initial prioritisation based on tiers

- **Tier 1:** the highest quality, prioritised for funding
- **Tier 2:** highly competitive, selected by assessment tools and dependent on remaining budget
- **Tier 3:** not competitive enough to be considered for funding

Further prioritisation based on rank

- Panel creates a ranked list from highest to lowest

Funding allocated

- Allocated down the list of applications in the highest tier
- Potential further allocation with partial randomisation



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Questions?

and Answers

Q&A

Frequently Asked Questions

➤ Is there a limit on the number of applications a research organisation (RO) can submit?

We do not plan to impose institutional caps, but we reserve the right to modify the assessment process as needed at any stage. We expect this funding opportunity to be appealing to a significant number of researchers. Therefore, we really encourage you to use an internal prioritisation process to:

- help ensure proposals are appropriately targeted to this opportunity
- lower the burden on applicants
- Contribute to efficiency withing the peer review process

Consider the overall scale of funding available – **we expect to fund 18-20 applications in total** - and the expected level of competition when doing internal quality assurance of applications. Make sure applications have a genuine prospect of being competitive.

Q&A

Frequently Asked Questions

➤ How should we do our internal prioritisation process?

This process should be managed internally and is up to you to manage. However, we strongly encourage you to consider EDI during your prioritisation process. We encourage you to read some resources here on [inclusive demand management](#).

➤ Do we need to prioritise before the registration phase?

No. We envisage that the registration phase will be a marker both for the BBSRC office and for university offices to know the level of demand on the call and who is interested in applying.

Q&A

Frequently Asked Questions

➤ How many times can I apply for a pioneer award?

You are only allowed to submit one application as project lead for a pioneer award, but there is no limit on the number of applications you can be a co-lead.

➤ If I am awarded a Pioneer Award (which includes PDRA support), will I lose my BBSRC New Investigator status?

Yes, if you are the project lead . BBSRC's normal rules regarding the new investigator scheme would apply to recipients of a pioneer award.

➤ Can ECR fellows apply?

This will depend on your fellowship – please contact us by email

Q&A

Frequently Asked Questions

➤ Are overseas co-leads able to be on the application?

No, standard BBSRC eligibility rules apply to all applicants. You may include people from overseas as project partners or collaborators.

➤ When will I hear back from BBSRC about my registration?

We aim to read and response to registrations as they come in, but you should receive a response no later than two weeks after the registration deadline.

➤ Can I change my project between registration and full stage?

Yes, small changes are allowed as we recognise that as you develop a full proposal there may be a slight shift in research focus. However, we would expect you to contact BBSRC for approval if you are planning to introduce entirely new aims or objectives.

Q&A

Frequently Asked Questions

➤ What level of risk will be accepted?

The scheme intends to have a high tolerance for risk. We will use bespoke assessment criteria designed to embed a positive review culture in supporting 'high-risk' ideas. The assessment will focus on the potential of the idea rather than a detailed assessment of preliminary data or track record. However, the panel will be looking for evidence that you have considered the broad feasibility of the project, any potential risks involved and the learning potential in the result of negative results.

➤ Is there a requirement for preliminary data?

There is no requirement for preliminary data. Projects should be early stage and involve new research directions and uncertainty. However, we will expect applicants to provide relevant background and reasoning for why their research idea might work, as well as a risk assessment to demonstrate that the research is well thought out.

Q&A

Frequently Asked Questions

➤ What constitutes 'exceptional circumstances' for allowing a three-year project?

The feedback from the pilot Pioneer awards call, we run a couple of years back, revealed that it was simply not possible to get suitable data with some models due to growing seasons and longer life cycles. If major limitations of similar nature are identified, then we will consider allowing a three-year project. The budget limit per proposal is the same regardless of the duration of the project.

You must seek prior approval from the office before submitting a project exceeding 24 months duration. If prior approval has not been sought, then proposals longer than two years will be rejected.

Q&A

Frequently Asked Questions

➤ **Is there an expectation that projects be multi-disciplinary?**

The scheme welcomes multi-disciplinary research, but it is not a requirement.

➤ **Can I include a partner from industry?**

Industrial partners are allowed but applications with a focus on user-driven challenges are excluded; for example, from industry or addressing applied challenges.

➤ **Can I incorporate technology/ methodology development in my proposal?**

Yes, however you must explain how this has been inspired by a specific biological question relevant to the understanding the rules of life area, ideally with some demonstration relevant to the biological question forming part of your proposal.

Announcement: The Transformative Research Technologies call is expected to launch later this year. Consider if your technology development proposal will be better suited to that scheme.

Announcement

During the webinar it was highlighted that the distributed peer review (DPR) period coincides with the Easter holidays. In response to this feedback, we have extended the DPR deadline by one week.

The new deadline for DPR is 12 April 2026.

We apologise for the oversight and appreciate your understanding.



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Q&A

Your Questions Answered – scope

- **The guidance appears to require some level of preliminary data, while also stating that no preliminary data is needed. Could you clarify?**

The BBSRC Pioneer Awards are specifically designed to support early-stage and untested adventurous bioscience research. Preliminary data is not required and proposals that look like follow-on funding or where the overall concept of the proposal is already proven/ substantially de-risked are not suitable. Applicants are expected to clearly articulate the rationale, feasibility, and potential impact of their proposed research. This may involve drawing on existing literature, theoretical frameworks, available resources or indirect evidence to support an idea.

- **How do you ensure you have the right experts to assess the feasibility of paradigm-shifting, novel, forward thinking proposals?**

Proposals will be preliminary assessed by you, the applicants via DPR. Full assessment will be conducted by multidisciplinary panels of experts briefed to focus on the potential impact, expertise of the team, identification of relevant risks, etc, rather than on traditional metrics like preliminary data or established feasibility. We accept that uncertainty is part of the nature of these awards.

Q&A

Your Questions Answered – eligibility & applicant roles

- **Can researchers at an earlier career stage be considered as PL?**

Provided you are eligible, applications from any career stage are welcome as PL or Co-L. [Check if you're eligible for funding – BBSRC](#)

- **Will the main applicant's career stage affect the decision-making process?**

Career stage is not part of the assessment process. The capability to deliver section of your application will allow you to set your previous track record in the context of your career stage. Pioneer awards aim to support early stage and untested ideas, lacking preliminary data.

- **Are Postdocs allowed to apply as leads?**

No. Postdocs could be included as a researcher co-lead. [Roles in funding applications: eligibility, responsibilities and costings guidance](#)

- **Are PLs who were successful in the pilot round of Pioneer awards eligible to apply to this round with a different project?**

Yes.

Q&A

Your Questions Answered – eligibility & applicant roles

- **Is there any eligibility conflict when an applicant already holds a UKRI "fellow" title?**

UKRI offers a wide range of fellowships. Eligibility will depend on the type and the time commitment of your fellowship. For a more specific answer please get in touch:

pioneerawards@bbsrc.ukri.org

- **Can an applicant be lead on a proposal and co-lead on another?**

Yes. Multiple applications by the same project lead are not permitted. Project co-leads may participate in multiple applications.

- **Does the new investigator scheme apply for this opportunity?**

No. The [New Investigators](#) scheme only runs in BBSRC responsive mode. Under the new investigator scheme, applications are assessed following the same procedure, but with a focus on research potential rather than track record. That is the case for all applications submitted to the Pioneer awards. Please note that **if you are successful in Pioneers then you would not be eligible for a responsive mode new investigator grant.**

Q&A

Your Questions Answered – funding and budget

➤ **Can PhD students be supported by the award?**

No. PhD funding is not an eligible cost.

➤ **Can postdocs be supported by the award?**

Yes.

➤ **Can technical staff be supported by the award?**

Yes.

➤ **Can equipment be funded by the award?**

Yes, however this call will only support research grants. Equipment purchase cannot be the primary focus of your application.

➤ **Are projects shorter than two years allowed?**

Yes. The duration of pioneer awards is expected to be a maximum of two years, unless prior approval has been sought.

Q&A

Your Questions Answered – application process

- **Does institutional prioritisation apply for mandatory registrations (stage one) or only for the full application stage (stage two)?**

Given the level of demand expected for this opportunity and the overall scale of funding available, **we expect all full applications to be quality assured by institutions**, so they have a genuine prospect of being competitive. We hope BBSRC's feedback on registrations will assist institutions in identifying the most suitable and competitive applications for stage two.

- **If we do not get prioritised for stage two: full applications, do we have to participate to the distributed peer review?**

No. Stage one: registrations will only be reviewed by BBSRC portfolio managers to ensure fit with BBSRC's remit and the scope of this opportunity. Stage two: full applications will be preliminary assessed via distributed peer review. During the preliminary assessment of full applications, each applicant will be expected to review only the summary and vision sections of 6-8 applications. By applying to this call, you are agreeing to act as reviewers and to have your proposal reviewed by your peers. Please do not apply for this opportunity if you would prefer not to take part in distributed peer review.

Q&A

Your Questions Answered – application process

- **Distributed peer review guidance mentions assessing only the Summary and Vision sections of an application, but we were told to leave Summary empty ("NA") at the first stage of submission?**

This opportunity has two mandatory stages, stage one: registrations and stage two: full applications.

For stage one: registrations, no summary is needed. Registrations will be reviewed only by BBSRC portfolio managers to ensure fit with BBSRC's remit and the scope of this opportunity.

For stage two we ask that you submit a full application, including a summary that we will use to identify the most suitable experts for your application. Full applications will be preliminary assessed via distributed peer review, during which reviewers will look only at the summary and vision sections of each application. The purpose of the preliminary assessment is to prioritise a subset of the most promising ideas (90-120) for full assessment. Full assessment will be conducted solely by expert panels who will assess all sections of the prioritised applications and score them independently. No applicants will be involved in the expert panels.

Q&A

Your Questions Answered – resubmissions & future rounds

- If a proposal is at a very early stage and lacks preliminary data, and it is neither successful nor is invited to resubmit, does that mean I can never resubmit it again in the future, even if I later develop it further and gather supporting evidence?

Only applications prioritised for full assessment following DPR, will be subject to BBSRC's [resubmission policy](#).

- Is there possibility to resubmit a project that scored high in the pilot scheme round?

Resubmissions are accepted by invitation only and must demonstrate substantial revisions. Please contact us to discuss in this instance prior to making a revised submission (pioneerawards@bbsrc.ukri.org).

- Do you plan to run this call regularly? Perhaps yearly?

It is unlikely we will run Pioneer awards on a yearly basis, but we would hope this to be a returning call, perhaps every 2-3 years, subject to budget.



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Thank you

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