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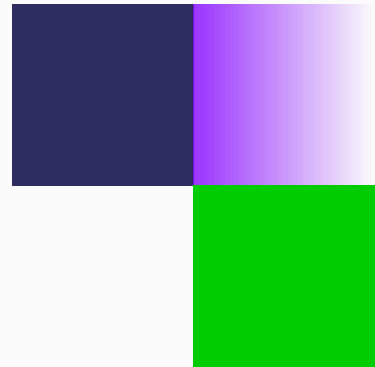
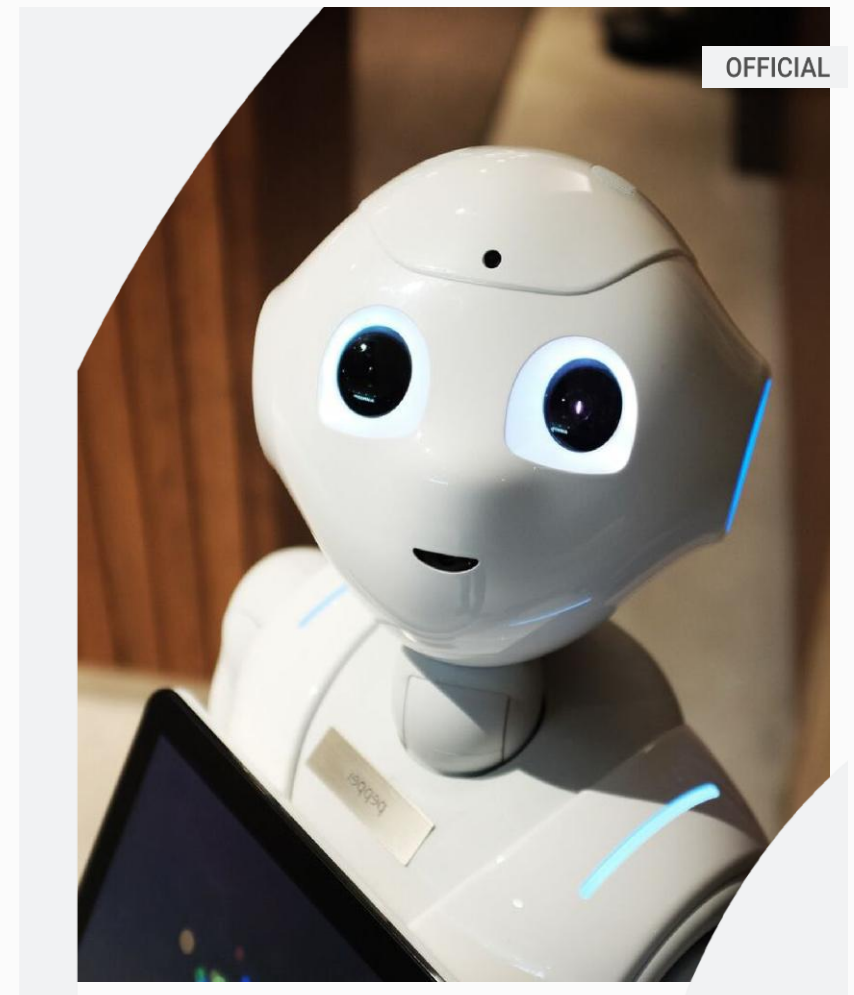
NERC Discovery Science

Exploring the Frontiers

- Funding opportunity overview

Technical notes

- This webinar is being recorded. Video and slides will be shared on [Exploring the frontiers of environmental research 2026 – UKRI](#)
- 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 will be visible in the chat.



Questions

- We have aimed to address any pre-submitted questions within the webinar content
- During the webinar, submit any questions via the Q&A function
- At any time after the webinar please submit any questions to the exploringfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org
- Detailed questions which are unlikely to be relevant to other attendees should also be sent to the exploring frontiers mailbox
- 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.

Introductions

Panellists

Vicki Durbridge

Head of Discovery Science

Beth Taylor

Senior Programme Manager – Discovery Science

Evie Croxford

Programme Manager – Discovery Science

Helen Armstrong

Grants manager

Lucy Gresley

ESRC – Strategic Lead Metascience Unit

Cillian Brophy

ESRC – Senior Analyst Metascience Unit



Agenda

1. General Overview of the Discovery Science portfolio

Led by Vicki Durbridge, Head of Discovery Science (5 minutes)

2. Exploring the Frontiers – Overview of the aims & scope

Led by Beth Taylor & Evie Croxford (15 minutes)

3. Exploring the Frontiers – Assessment process

Led by Beth Taylor & Evie Croxford (10 minutes)

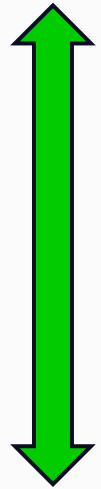
4. Exploring the Frontiers – Q&A

Led by Beth Taylor & Evie Croxford (20 minutes)



NERC Discovery Science Overview

Small



NEW: Exploring the Frontiers (*launched 10 Sept 2026 – frequency TBC*)

Pushing the Frontiers (*always open – no closing date*)

pushingfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org

NEW: Transcending the Frontiers (*pilot opportunity in development – anticipated launch spring 2027, frequency TBC*)

transcendingfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org

Large

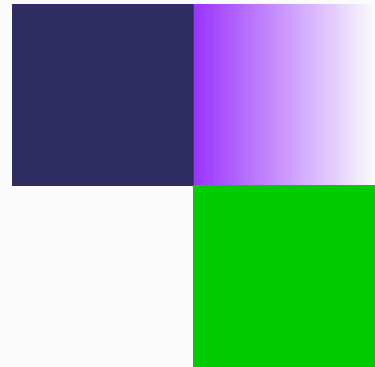
*Rapid
response*

Urgency funding (*always open – no closing date*)

urgencygrants@nerc.ukri.org



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Exploring the Frontiers – Key dates

Opportunity launched on Funding Finder: 27 August 2026

Opportunity opened on TFS: 10th September 2026

Webinar: 17th September 2026

Opportunity closes: 12th November 2026 at 4pm UK time

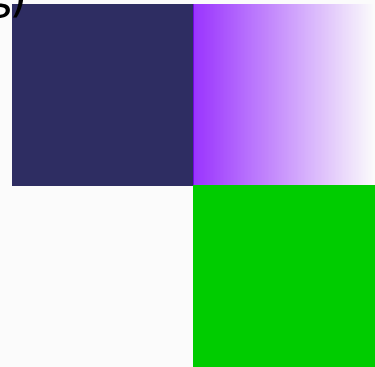
Distributed Peer Review (DPR) information webinar: 6th January 2027

DPR period: 6th January 27 – 27th January 2027

Outcomes announced: March 2027

DPR Conflict of Interest deadline: 13th January 2027 (exploringfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org)

Grants must start: 1st May 2027



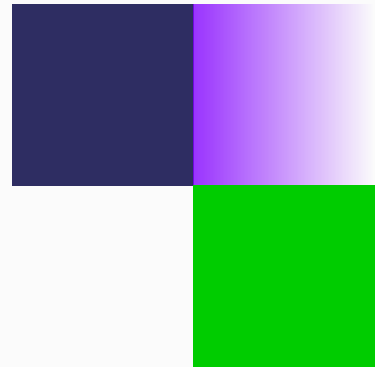
Exploring the Frontiers – Aim & Scope

Aim

To test new ideas, concepts or approaches when they are not yet sufficiently developed for standard funding routes and the outcomes are inherently uncertain.

Scope

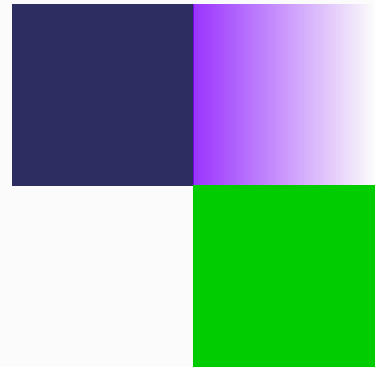
This funding opportunity supports early-stage, curiosity-driven environmental research with the potential to be transformative.



Scope – continued

Your research project:

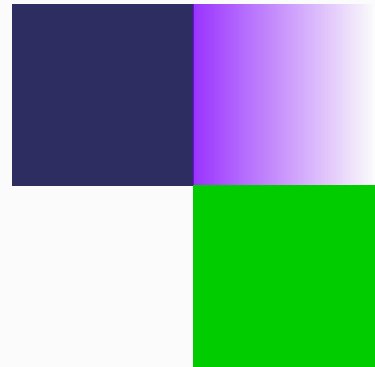
- should be original and visionary, challenging current thinking and paradigms, representing a clear departure from existing research directions or establishing a completely new line of enquiry
- may include the development of new techniques to tackle existing problems
- must be early stage and untested, 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 pure, applied, technology-led or policy-driven research, potentially crossing disciplinary boundaries



Scope – continued

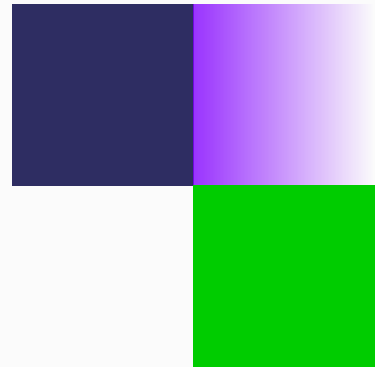
This opportunity is **not** intended to support:

- activities that would be supported through any other more appropriate funding opportunity (as determined by us).
- incremental developments along existing lines of enquiry (for example, extending previous work in a predictable way)
- established research programmes seeking further validation
- activities that are primarily non-research focused, or those focussed on the career development of an individual as a researcher (for example: networking, studentships, fellowships, infrastructure, equipment purchase, or training).
- applications that focus on methodological or technology development purely to address a specific end user's need.



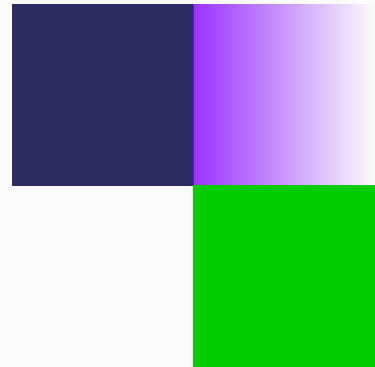
To note:

- There is no organisational-level management being applied – **note that at an individual level an applicant may appear on a maximum of two applications.** Of those two, they may be listed as project lead on only one.
- Opportunity is open to organisations with standard eligibility.
- Individual eligibility has been expanded
- Under the UKRI and Research Council of Norway Money Follows Cooperation agreement a project co lead can be based in a Norwegian Institution.



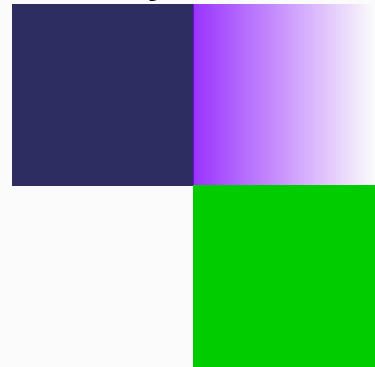
To note – continued:

- Applicants must include within their application a distinct, evidenced statement outlining the novelty of the proposed research, which can be interpreted by UKRI staff and generalist assessors. **Failure to do so may lead to an office rejection.**
- The Project lead (PL) is required to cost their time for a **minimum** of 0.2 FTE, ensuring that this individual has a substantive relationship to the proposed project, whilst enabling part-time and flexible working patterns.
- If your application is successful, we will publish some personal information on the [UKRI Gateway to Research](#).
- NERC plan to conduct a review of the end-to-end process to help inform continuous improvement, this will include aspects including for example the use of DPR.



Assessment process

- This opportunity will trial Distributed Peer Review (DPR), where applicants act as the reviewers for other applications submitted to the opportunity, to inform funding decisions.
- Once the opportunity closes, NERC office will examine the remit, eligibility and scope of all applications. If your application is not suitable for this funding opportunity then you will be advised by email and your application will be 'office rejected'.
- By applying for this funding opportunity, you are consenting to take part in DPR. Please do not apply for this funding opportunity if you would prefer not to take part in the DPR process. The DPR process and outcomes will be evaluated by the UK Metascience Unit.



Assessment process – continued

- All applications will be split into thematic panels based on remit. These panels will then be further divided into two 'reviewer pools'.
- All applicants will be given 15 working days to complete their reviews and must be available to complete their reviews between **6th and 27th January 2027**
- All applicants will be receiving their reviews on the **6th January** and can expect to receive approximately 8 applications to review
- Reviewers will be assigned to a different 'reviewer pool' from the applications that they review.
- Any conflicts of interest must be flagged to NERC by **13th January via email** (not in TFS). Conflict flagging must not be used to reduce the number of reviews you have to deliver by the given deadline. In instances where a conflict has been identified, NERC will aim to reassign other applications to you.

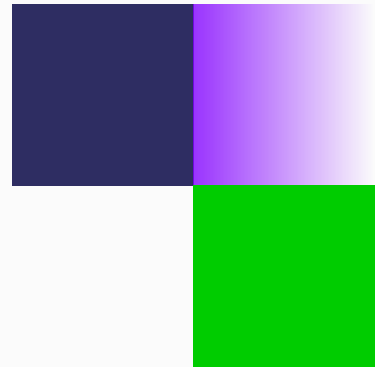
Assessment process – continued

- All applicants will be expected to review the **vision, approach**, ethics and responsible research and innovation sections.
- All applicants will need to score each application from 1 (poor) to 6 (exceptional). The scoring definitions will be shared prior to the DPR webinar on 6th January 2027.
- Applications will be tiered based on mean review score.
- Feedback will be provided in the form of reviews and will be provided once the final funding decisions have been made (March 27).
- NERC will make the final funding decision. We reserve the right to adopt a portfolio approach to fund a diverse range of projects in accordance with [How we make decisions – UKRI](#); balancing the remit of funded research in such a way that is appropriate to the funding opportunity aims.

Assessment process – Key notes

- [UKRI resubmission policy](#) applies to this opportunity.
- The Project lead (PL) in each application will be expected to conduct the DPR. Please do not apply for this funding opportunity if you would prefer not to take part in the DPR process. Co-leads or any other member of the team are not required to act as a reviewer.
- The use of generative models (ChatGPT, CoPilot etc.) in the preparation of reviews is not permitted in view of the confidentiality of the review process.

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





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Questions?

and Answers

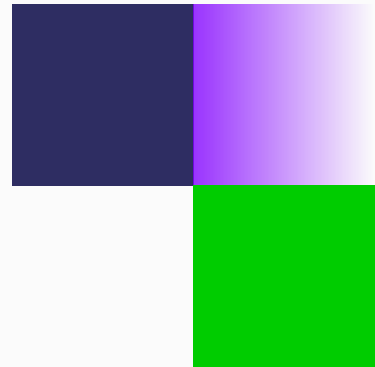
Frequently Asked Questions

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

Organisational level management (DM) is not currently being applied to this funding opportunity and 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 quality assurance process to:

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

Consider the overall scale of funding available (**we expect to fund in the region of 50 –70 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.



Frequently Asked Questions

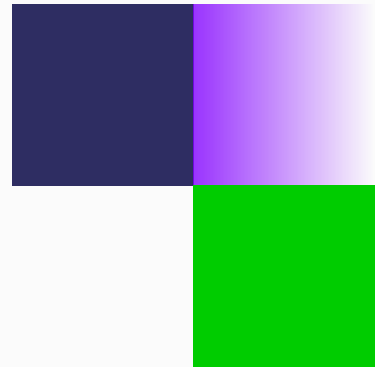
- Should the EtF opportunity be a stepping stone to a PtF application? Would applications that have a clear transition to a PtF application be preferred over truly exploratory/high risk ideas at the edges of disciplines?

No, not necessarily; an Exploring the Frontiers application doesn't need to link to a future Pushing the Frontiers application. It may naturally do so; however, it may not and may result in a new start up, a new research field, or the development of new collaborations across domains and disciplines.

- Collaborations

We welcome, and are increasingly supporting, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research, designed, supported and delivered in partnership with other research funders and research users.

Please note that the research must sit predominantly within [NERC's research areas](#)



Frequently Asked Questions

- **Eligibility requirements of the opportunity**

This opportunity is open to organisations with standard eligibility.

To be eligible as a project lead, you must:

- Be resident in the UK
- Have a substantial relationship, and be affiliated, with an eligible UK research organisation

We recognise that expertise is built through many routes, including industry experience, applied or practitioner roles, technical careers, non linear pathways and time spent outside academia. Therefore, we focus on individuals' talent, skills and capability to lead and deliver the proposed work, rather than formal qualifications and length in post. [Individual eligibility – UKRI](#)

The Research Organisation will also need to agree that the applicant has the suitable capability and are therefore willing to support them in leading this work. [Roles in funding applications: eligibility, responsibilities and costings guidance – UKRI](#)

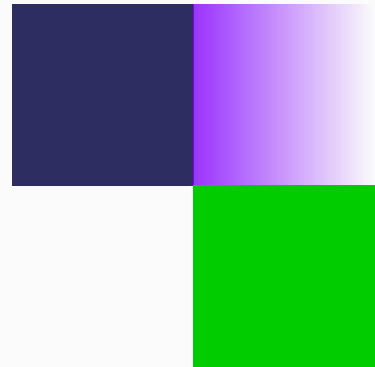
Frequently Asked Questions

- Employment status and eligibility
- PLs and PCO-Ls must have a substantial relationship with an eligible organisation. Examples of a substantial relationship with an organisation include:
 - emeritus status (that is, retired but still maintains their relationship with their department or the university)
 - honorary appointment with the organisation
 - contract with the submitting organisation, normally outlasting the duration of the project

If you do not yet work for the organisation who will hold the grant, you can still apply. However, you must first discuss with the potential organisation and get their support before you start your application.

Further information

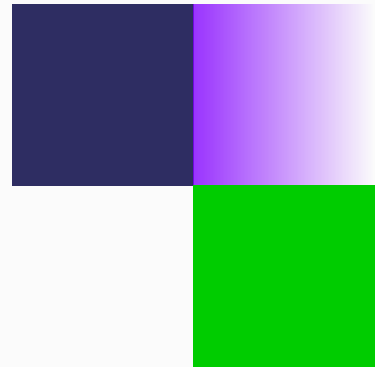
[Roles in funding applications: eligibility, responsibilities and costings guidance – UKRI](#)



Frequently Asked Questions

- **Application assessment**
 - Examination of eligibility and scope
 - All eligible applications will undergo distributed peer review (DPR)
 - All applications will be allocated to one of two reviewer pools
 - NERC will evaluate the DPR process and outcomes – you will be approached for feedback following the assessment process.
 - NERC will make the final funding decision.

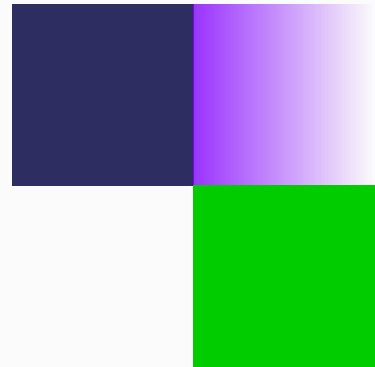
We aim to complete the assessment process within four months of receiving your application.



Frequently Asked Questions

- Examples of previous EtF awards

The scope, application requirements and assessment process have fundamentally changed since the initial pilot was launched in 2022. We encourage applicants to read the funding finder entry in detail to ascertain what sort of applications would be eligible for this opportunity.





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Thank you

- NERC Exploring the Frontiers September 2026

Please email any further questions that may arise to exploringfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org