



UK Research and Innovation Equality Impact Assessment Form

About your activity

Title of your activity

Exploring the frontiers of environmental research 2026

Type of activity

Funding opportunity

Council or business area

NERC, Discovery Science

Aims and objectives

This funding opportunity aims to enable researchers to test new ideas, approaches, or concepts at a stage when they are not yet sufficiently developed for standard funding routes and the outcomes are inherently uncertain. By supporting innovative new lines of research and reducing the expectation for preliminary data, this scheme intends to encourage a high-risk, high-reward culture in the application and assessment process.

This funding opportunity supports early-stage, curiosity-driven environmental research with the potential to be transformative. We are seeking to invest in our best researchers to pursue world leading, truly novel, exploratory research projects, the outcomes of which could lead to a clear and significant advancement in knowledge, capability or application. We welcome multidisciplinary research and collaborations with other UK organisations and encourage applications from individuals at all career stages via this funding opportunity.

The EIA will cover the communications plan, the application and assessment process, the evaluation upon completion of the opportunity and post award management.

Background

The scheme was initially launched via a pilot funding opportunity in 2022. The pilot opportunity process was reviewed, and the scheme has since undergone iterations to the scope, eligibility and the assessment process. Some changes have also been introduced in response to UKRI's

revised individual eligibility criteria, widening the eligibility of PL roles. The outcomes of the pilot review indicated that it may be beneficial to stipulate a minimum FTE for project leads to ensure a commitment to delivery of the project. It was also recommended that suitable mechanisms for managing demand and delivering faster and more efficient assessment and funding decisions should be investigated.

Who is affected?

Applicants (project leads, project co-leads, researchers and other team members including RO support staff), applicants acting as reviewers, eligible UK research organisations, project partners and stakeholders, NERC and UKRI staff involved in delivery, assessment and award management.

What data and consultation have you used?

- UKRI and NERC equality, diversity and inclusion policies and guidance
- DPR survey results or feedback from people within the Metascience unit and across other research councils (ESRC & BBSRC)
- Previous consultations following the review of the pilot opportunity in 2022
- Previous EIAs both within and outside UKRI
- Opportunities outside of NERC – Wellcome Trust and Research England
- UKRI/NERC funding opportunity templates and wider DPR assessment processes,
- Evidence and learning from previous NERC funding opportunities, including Chairs' panel meeting reports, views of panel members and applicants, staff observations and suggestions at wash-up meetings post panel.

Impact on specific groups

Are there general impacts on multiple groups?

Whilst designing the Exploring the Frontiers opportunity, we considered equality, diversity and inclusion during the scoping phase. We identified some general impacts on multiple groups;

Impact: Some people may miss communications around the launch of the opportunity. The opportunity will be open for 9 weeks; the relatively short duration of the open period may impact some individuals.

Action: Communications have been targeted via different channels (LinkedIn, List server) both externally and internally to inform our community and UKRI/NERC staff about the upcoming opportunity. This communication has been made 8 weeks before the launch of the opportunity.

Action: Webinar dates will be advertised on the funding finder to ensure that applicants have enough notice to attend and all webinars will be recorded and distributed to those participants who are unable to attend.

Action: We have consulted calendars to ensure that none of our announcements, or deadlines for this opportunity coincide with any school breaks, major religious holidays or observances. The opportunity aligns with UKRI minimum requirements plus an additional week to account for the October half term holiday.

Impact: This funding opportunity is being assessed via distributed peer review (DPR). By applying for this funding opportunity, applicants are consenting to take part in DPR. Applicants who do not wish to/do not have the time to take part in DPR would therefore be ineligible to apply for the opportunity.

Action: Whilst DPR may dissuade some applicants from applying, by its very nature, allowing applicants to contribute to the assessment process broadens the opportunity for engagement in (and learning from) the assessment process to a wider group of participants.

Action: We have weighed the benefits and the drawbacks of DPR, and we feel confident that having a diverse reviewer pool with the same make up as the applicant pool will ultimately increase participation of underrepresented groups in the assessment process for future funding opportunities. Additionally, testimonials from previous calls that employed DPR suggest that applicants benefit from participating and manage to improve their own application writing skills for future opportunities. Finally, to minimise the required effort we will only be asking reviewers to assess the Vision and Approach sections of their assigned applications. Comprehensive training guidance will be provided for reviewers in an accessible format.

Impact: This funding opportunity stipulates a project duration to a maximum of two years. By applying for this funding opportunity, applicants are aware of this requirement from the outset.

Action: We will remain committed to part time applicants and ensure that all people related exceptions are considered.

Impact on protected characteristics

Complete the table for all characteristics. You only need to add details if there is a positive or negative impact.

Protected characteristic	Impact (positive, negative, none or unknown)	Details of impact	Actions to reduce negative or increase positive impact



Age	Negative	This funding opportunity is open to eligible individuals based at organisations eligible for NERC funding. We are mindful that the advice to ROs to carry out quality assurance checks on applications, carries the risk that certain people might be excluded from the final submissions made to this opportunity – this may disproportionately impact those early in their career with less experience, or who don't have adequate support in writing applications.	We are committed to encouraging equality, diversity, and inclusion by eliminating unlawful discrimination in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. This opportunity aims to leverage the full strengths of the UK's diverse research and innovation community. We are advising ROs to consider the scope and assessment criteria of the funding opportunity and NERC's advice on each submitted registration when they are checking applications, while also ensuring these processes employ good practice relating to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Data on applicants' age will not be sourced in the UKRI Funding Service and will not be used to make funding decisions. This opportunity includes UKRI standard eligibility principles, allowing academics, technicians and research staff to be employed in the PL role. Eligibility is based on skills and experience rather than qualifications. UKRI are committed to achieving equality of opportunity for all funding applicants. We encourage applications from a diverse range of researchers.
Disability	Negative	This funding opportunity is open to eligible individuals based at organisations eligible for NERC funding. We are mindful that the advice to ROs to carry out quality assurance checks on applications, carries the risk that certain people might be	We are committed to encouraging equality, diversity, and inclusion by eliminating unlawful discrimination in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. This opportunity aims to leverage the full strengths of the UK's diverse research and innovation community. We are advising ROs to consider the scope and assessment

		excluded from the final submissions made to this opportunity – this may disproportionately impact those early in their career with less experience, or who don't have adequate support in writing applications. Career breaks in applicant track records may result in the potential for unconscious bias during assessment. The Funding Service is compliant with relevant accessibility standards for RO staff and applicants. However, it may raise some difficulties when applicants must review up to 8 applications through DPR, due to the volume of effort.	criteria of the funding opportunity and NERC's advice on each submitted registration when they are carrying out quality assurance checks, while also ensuring these processes employ good practice relating to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The Capability to Deliver document does not form part of the EtF assessment process. However, should the applicant wish to disclose further information the Resume for Research and Innovation has an optional additions section, where applicants may provide context, such as details for career breaks. Clear signposting of UKRI disability and accessibility support during application, assessment and award. Applicants will be signposted to Disability and accessibility support for UKRI applicants and grant holders – UKRI, which provides guidance and practical support throughout the funding lifecycle. Applicants will be given the opportunity to confidentially disclose any reasonable adjustments required to support their full participation in the process. Requests will be handled sensitively and in confidence, with adjustments implemented wherever feasible to remove barriers to engagement. Digital Accessibility and Inclusive Participation. We will take steps to ensure that all digital guidance relating to the
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			application and assessment processes are accessible and inclusive. This includes adherence to recognised digital accessibility standards and best practice. Considerations include, but are not limited to: • Ensuring all digital materials meet recognised accessibility standards, enabling equal access for all users. • Ensuring staff have sufficient EDI training to be able to respond effectively to requirements of all applicants and assessors. The requirement of DPR and expected workload have been included in the Funding Opportunity text so that applicants can plan and distribute their workload.
Gender reassignment	None	No reference is made to gender in our documents. We will work to ensure the use of gender-neutral language in our documents.	N/A
Marriage or civil partnership	None	No reference is made in our document, and we do not ask any disclosure on their marriage or civil partnership status.	N/A
Pregnancy and maternity	Negative	The short-term nature of the opportunity and the short duration of the grants may pose barriers for applicants on leave, with childcare responsibilities or with health needs. Completion of the application may be affected by different types of parental leave, both in terms of those in research	Provision for parental leave are covered in UKRI terms and conditions. Communications have been published two months before the opportunity opens so that applicants can start making considering applying to the opportunity. The opportunity will be open for at least 8 weeks for applicants to have

		organisations as well as partner organisations. Childcare responsibilities could also be a barrier to application submission or in terms of application assessment. Applicants may need to take longer than the stipulated 2 years to complete a project if they are the main researcher and take parental leave for example.	sufficient time to prepare their applications. Extension periods have been built into the assessment window to allow for MAT/PAT and careers leave. UKRI terms and conditions relating to no-cost extensions will apply and exceptions can be granted for parental leave etc.
Race	Negative	Applicants are not asked to disclose their race. However, there is potential risk of bias by reviewers against an applicant based on name and perceived race.	Reviews referencing the race of the applicant or displaying bias will be marked as 'Unusable'. As stipulated in UKRI Funding Service terms of use – UKRI Reviewer protocols stipulate a code of practice. Ensuring we are committed to fair, robust, transparent and credible decision making. We are committed to raising awareness of, and taking steps to remove, the impact of unintentional bias in our systems, processes, behaviours and culture.
Religion or belief	Negative	Risk of discrimination because it is known that somebody (either a research applicant or research participants) has a particular faith or belief. Risk of bias by scheduling key dates on or around religious holidays.	Ensure that religious observances are taken into account when planning funding opportunity timelines, including scheduling key dates to avoid major religious festivals (if impossible to avoid, otherwise consider mitigations)
Sex	Negative	Use of gendered language can present a barrier to participation. Risk of bias by reviewers against an applicant based on name and sex.	Ensure use of gender-neutral language in our documents. Reviews referencing gender negatively or displaying bias will be marked as 'Unusable'



Sexual orientation	Unknown	Applicants are not asked to disclose their sexual orientation. However, there may be potential for bias, bullying or harassment if the sexual orientation of an applicant is known or assumed.	Reviews referencing the sexual orientation of the applicant or displaying bias will be marked as 'Unusable'.
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Impact on additional characteristics

Complete the table for all characteristics. You only need to add details if there is a positive or negative impact.

Additional characteristics	Impact (positive, negative, none or unknown)	Details of impact	Actions to reduce negative or increase positive impact
Geographical location and place	Unknown	This funding opportunity is open to those organisations with standard eligibility. Potential reviewer bias based on university ranking or location.	Reviews displaying bias based on university ranking or location will be marked as 'Unusable'. There is no requirement to travel for assessment so there is no impact.
Socio-economic status	Unknown	Potential reviewer bias based on university ranking or location.	Applicants must apply through the Research Organisation, which helps to remove many potential accessibility barriers providing institutional support. Reviews displaying bias based on university ranking or location will be marked as 'Unusable'.
Education background	Unknown	Potential for reviewer bias based on whatever is disclosed in the application about applicants' educational backgrounds	Reviews displaying bias based on educational background will be marked as 'Unusable'. Applicants are asked to use plain English in their applications so that those with other or more

			generalist expertise can understand what it is proposed.
Parent or guardian responsibilities	Negative	Potentially conflict with childcare commitment to write an application and take on the distributed peer review.	The timeline of the opportunity is shared in advance, and the requirement and timing of the DPR is explained in the opportunity text. The DPR has been scheduled in January to avoid school holidays. The timetable allows for flexibility with reviewer deadlines should extensions be required.
Carer responsibilities	Negative	Potentially conflict with childcare commitment to write an application and take on the distributed peer review.	The timeline of the opportunity is shared in advance, and the requirement and timing of the DPR is explained in the opportunity text. The DPR has been scheduled in January to avoid school holidays. The timetable allows for flexibility with reviewer deadlines should extensions be required.
Political opinion (Northern Ireland only)	N/A		
Other characteristics		There may be other characteristics that we have not considered that may have negative impact. Additionally, people with more than one protected or additional characteristics may have more negative impacts. We should not assume that everyone has equal access to technological devices and internet.	Where possible, alternative formats for information will be considered.

Final decision



Make a decision on whether to proceed with the activity

Decision: Some negative and some positive impacts have been identified, therefore activity will proceed with caution and awareness of mitigations to reduce negative impacts where possible.

The mitigations outlined will enable the opportunity to be adaptable to overcome barriers on accessibility and eliminate potential bias.

Review and sign off

How will you monitor and review the impact of your activity?

This EIA will be monitored regularly during the management of the funding opportunity by the project team. Responsibility for this will rest with the Opportunity Senior Programme Manager. The funding opportunity is a pilot, and the EIA will also be reviewed as part of the final evaluation process.

Contact

Beth Taylor beth.taylor@nerc.ukri.org

Will the EIA be published?

EIAs should be published alongside relevant funding activities for example funding opportunities and events

Who has this been signed off by?

Liesbeth Renders – Associate Director

Submitting the form

You need to [submit the form to the central repository](#)

EIAs for the International Science Partnership Funds should be emailed to: ISPF@ukri.org



Change log

Include changes as you've reviewed the EIA. For example, based on input received from x at the announcement of opportunity stage, x was added

Name	Date	Version	Change
		1	
		2	
		3	

Action plan

Add the actions you intend to take (or have taken) to address the negative impact you have identified. Actions should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound).

Action	Deadline	Owner	How will it be monitored?	What is the outcome?