



Engineering and
Physical Sciences
Research Council

Next Generation AI: Explainable AI

Webinar

8 September 2026 | 12:30pm to 1:30pm UK time

If you would like to ask a question, please submit via the Q&A function

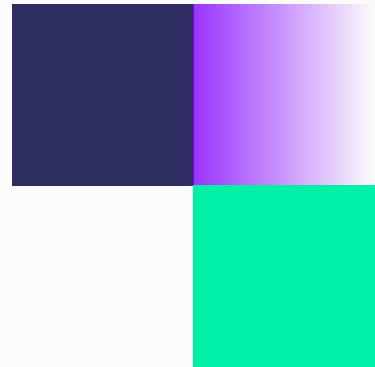
What we will cover

- 01 Purpose and scope
- 02 Eligibility
- 03 Assessment and next steps
- 04 Questions

Introducing the UKRI IS8 Programmes

- The IS8 Priority Programmes are a new cross-UKRI mechanism intended to strengthen strategic coordination, prioritisation and delivery across areas of national importance. They are being established to support more coordinated, mission-oriented working across UKRI.
- Delivery will continue to rely on distributed expertise and capability across UKRI rather than large centralised delivery teams.

The IS8 Programmes are not intended to replace councils or existing expertise. They are intended to strengthen coordination, alignment and strategic impact across a complex and increasingly interconnected landscape.



The IS8 AI Programme

Our role – To build UK AI capability, accelerate adoption, deliver growth.

The overall vision for the AI IS8 Programme is to:

1. Support the UK being a global leader in AI
2. Contribute to UK growth by growing the AI sector
3. Create a coherent Programme across Research and Innovation

The Programme's role in the AI ecosystem is to intervene in:

- Long-horizon or market missing technology development,
- Shared compute and data infrastructure,
- Areas of strategic UK advantage to support novel markets e.g. AI for Science,
- Priority market areas; AI-Enabled Health & Life Sciences, Advanced Materials with AI and Secure AI for Defence & Autonomy and
- Talent pipelines.

UKRI's AI landscape

- AI-related activity exists across councils, Innovate UK, institutes, infrastructure and strategic partnerships.
- The six pillars below – provide a strategic framing for UKRI AI activity and areas of long-term capability development.

Technology development



AI for Research



Skills and talent



Innovation and adoption



Responsible AI



Data and infrastructure



The Opportunity:

Next generation artificial intelligence (AI): explainable AI

- Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming research, industry and public services, but progress is not universal across sectors
- Increasing AI explainability could unlock a further wave of innovation with the potential to advance safety, reliability and responsible use
- This could underpin the next generation of AI technologies and create new market opportunities

The opportunity aims to support speculative and high-risk fundamental research with the potential to deliver high reward by enabling a step change in the explainability of future AI systems

£12,000,000

Total fund

£602,500

Maximum full economic cost
UKRI funds 80%: up to £482,000.

24 months

Maximum project duration

20 Oct

Application deadline

The opportunity aims to

- Support potentially transformative, highly novel, fundamental research with the potential to deliver a step change in the explainability of future AI systems.
- This would lay the foundations for future societal, economic and technological benefits, including new market opportunities for the UK
- Strengthen the UK's capability to design, develop and deploy explainable AI technologies
- Broaden access to strategic AI funding, particularly for new entrants and early and mid-career researchers in the UK
- Enable small-scale, rapid projects that generate foundational insights which can be built on in the future
- Deliver a faster process compared to current standard funding routes, while maintaining robust decision making that is proportionate to the level of risk

Fit to scheme

Projects should:

- Aim to disrupt existing areas of explainable AI research or create new ones, delivering research with the potential to lead to radically new and disruptive technologies and a step change in explainability of future AI systems
- Adopt a risk tolerant approach utilising ways of working that encourage and enable transformative outcomes rather than incremental advances
- Support an ambitious and capable project team with the appropriate breadth and depth of expertise required to achieve the research objectives

Projects are not expected to:

- Produce tangible outcomes, such as new AI models or spinouts, within two years
- succeed in all of their research goals, especially the most risky and ambitious
- avoid failure; approaches that do not work as intended can still generate important learning and valuable knowledge for the wider research community

Scope

Applications may come from mathematics, computer science, AI and other relevant disciplines

Explainable AI research may ask:

- How do AI systems function?
- How can AI systems be explained and how are explanations understood by different audiences?
- Why do AI systems produce particular outputs, behaviours or decisions?

Applications do not need to fit predefined categories. We particularly welcome novel and potentially paradigm-shifting approaches that challenge existing assumptions or extend beyond established areas of explainable AI research

Eligibility

Standard UKRI eligibility applies

- Organisations must meet the standard eligibility requirements for UKRI
- Researcher co-leads are encouraged where they made a substantial intellectual contribution and will be engaged in the research
- Joint leadership is allowed, with one administrative project lead at an eligible UK organisation
- Given the short-term nature of the grant and fixed start date, the project lead (PL) may choose to contribute a greater proportion of their time to the project than is standard. This should be justified and proportional to the activities set out in the proposal

Particularly welcomed

Early and mid-career
UK researchers

Assessment areas

- Vision and approach
- Applicant and team capability to deliver
- Ethics and responsible research and innovation (RRI)
- Resources and cost justification
- Risk and reward
- Nominate reviewers

Find details of assessment questions and criteria under the 'Application questions' heading in the 'How to apply' section.

Application

Vision

- Quality and importance within or beyond the field
- Potential to advance understanding or generate new knowledge
- Timeliness in the current context
- Potential impact on research, society, the economy or the environment
- A clear advance in future AI explainability

Approach

- An effective, appropriate and feasible design
- Transparent methods and a reasoned choice of framework
- Risks to delivery and how they will be managed
- Milestones, timelines and an optional diagrammatic workplan
- Routes from outputs to outcomes, supported by the research environment

Collaborators

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCHERS

- An international researcher may only be a project co-lead (international) through the UKRI-RCN Money Follows Cooperation agreement
- Other international collaborators should be included as project partners

PARTNERS AND RESUBMISSIONS

- Project partners may be from industry, academia, government or the third sector, in the UK or overseas
- Direct and in-kind contributions from partners are encouraged, but are not a condition of eligibility
- Uninvited resubmissions of projects previously submitted to UKRI or another funder are not accepted

Application

Manage responsible research throughout the project

DATA

Address consent, confidentiality, anonymisation, security, reuse and relevant information standards.

MANDATORY DECLARATIONS

Confirm whether the work involves or affects animals, genetic technologies or GMOs, and human participants in health-related research

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

Explain how positive societal, environmental and economic benefits will be maximised while negative impacts are reduced

If you judge that no ethical or RRI issue arises, explain why

Application

Resources and cost justification | 1,000 words

- Project staff and their contribution
- Significant fieldwork or collaboration travel, excluding routine travel between organisations or conferences
- Any equipment above £25,000
- Unusually large or exceptional consumables
- Facilities and infrastructure costs
- Resources costed as Exceptions

Assessors want to see that the resource request is:

Comprehensive

Appropriate and justified

Optimal for the intended outcomes

Designed to maximise outcomes and impact

Reasonable adjustment costs can be requested where they arise directly from working on the project

Application

Risk and reward | 1,000 words

Show how the work could:

- Revolutionise an existing field or create a new one
- Test unproven tools or techniques
- Cause a paradigm shift in thought or knowledge
- Lead to radically new and disruptive technologies
- Otherwise create a step change in explainable AI

Explain why success could generate significant long-term rewards and contribute to ambitions in the AI Opportunities Action Plan and Industrial Strategy.

Also explain why the idea is too speculative for existing funding routes

Application

Nominate reviewers| 200 words

Please identify up to two members of the team involved who will participate in the distributed peer review process

For each reviewer, you must provide:

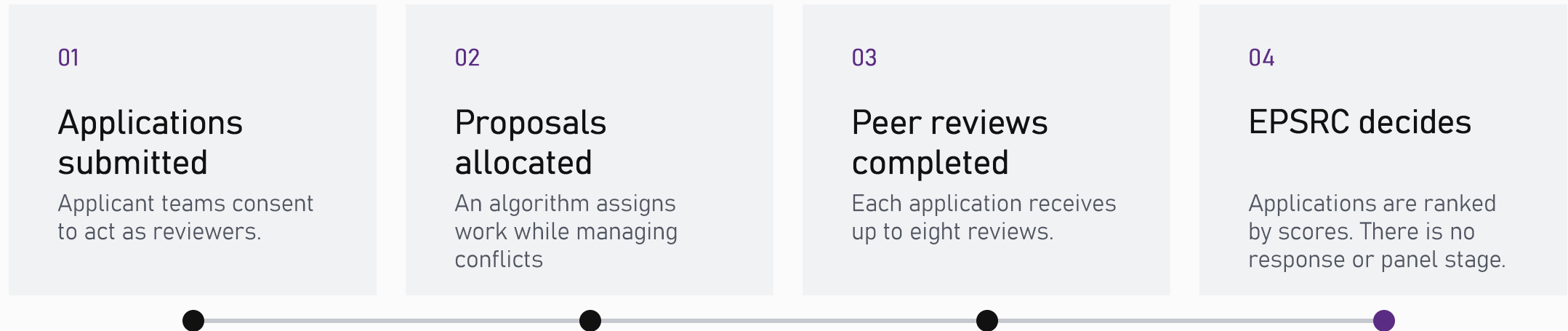
- their name
- their institution
- their email address.
- which UKRI research council their expertise broadly falls within
(that is EPSRC, ESRC, AHRC, MRC, BBSRC, NERC or STFC)

Note : Failure to provide at least one reviewer (maximum two) will result in your proposal being rejected.
Reviewers should include the Project lead and/or a Co-lead if appropriate

The applicant team should only nominate individuals with the capacity, knowledge and confidence to provide constructive, comprehensive, quality reviews

Assessment

Participation in distributed peer review is a condition of applying



- Projects must start on 1 February 2027 and last for up to 24 months
- UKRI will make the final funding decision
- UKRI reserves the right to take a portfolio balancing approach

Assessment

Distributed Peer Review (DPR) – this is a peer review process where the applicants are also the reviewers for the same opportunity

- This opportunity has been selected for DPR
- All applicants are also assessors and will review other proposals for the same opportunity to decide who gets funding
- Eligible applicants will be asked to review around **eight applications**
- Conflicts of interest will be declared as usual
- Completing your allocated reviews is a requirement of the selection process

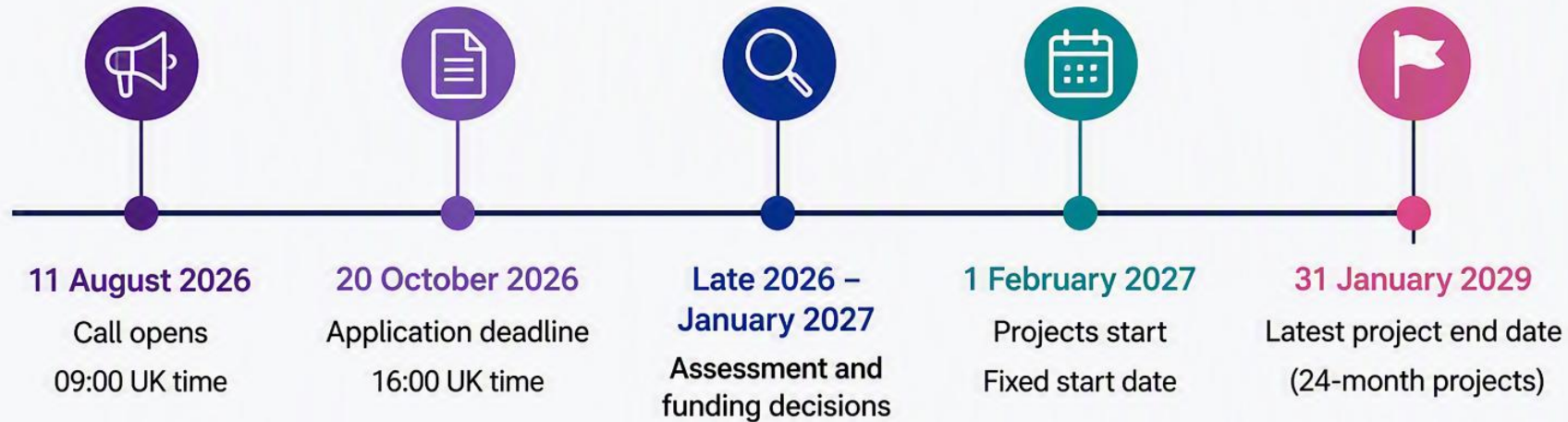
Assessment

Distributed Peer Review (DPR) – this is a peer review process where the applicants are also the reviewers for the same opportunity

- By applying, you are agreeing to act as reviewers and to have your proposal reviewed by your peers
- Please do not apply for this particular opportunity if you would prefer not to take part in DPR
- Please note that if you do not complete your reviews, your own application will be rejected
- Up to two reviewers from the project team may be nominated, where they have the relevant expertise and capacity, to help share workload and reduce reviewer burden

Timeline

Next generation artificial intelligence (AI): explainable AI – Timeline





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Questions

Opportunity enquiries

ai.robotics@epsrc.ukri.org

Funding Service support

support@funding-service.ukri.org

01793 547490

Helpdesk hours

Mon-Thu 8:30am-5:00pm

Fri 8:30am-4:30pm

Include the council, opportunity name and application reference in your query. Contact one mailbox at a time.