



Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council

Next generation artificial intelligence (AI): explainable AI

Frequently Asked Questions, including common questions asked and answered in the webinar on 08 September 2026

General enquiries

Can we expect to see more calls following this type of model?
And if so, is this likely to be in other thematic areas or just AI?

This approach aligns with UKRI's recently published delivery plan and strategic direction ([UKRI Delivery Plan 2026 to 2027 – UKRI](#)), which emphasise strengthening support for emerging research areas, enabling appropriate risk-taking, and adopting more innovative approaches to funding, delivery and evaluation.

This funding opportunity is the first to be delivered under the flagship UKRI IS8 AI Programme. It is a pilot and the first in what is hoped to be (subject to budgets) a series of next-generation AI funding opportunities spotlighting emerging priorities in response to the UKRI AI Strategic Framework, societal and governmental needs.

UKRI has also committed to trialling innovative approaches to funding and assessment, including testing mechanisms such as distributed peer review and the use of advanced analytics to support faster decision-making and improved outcomes. As this is a pilot programme, UKRI and EPSRC will evaluate its effectiveness, including feedback from applicants, reviewers,



	and funded teams, as well as the overall research outcomes. Any decisions on whether similar approaches are used in future opportunities will be informed by that assessment.
There appears to be some overlap between the two Next Generation AI calls: Explainable AI and Transformative sustainable AI technologies Can you clarify what you see as the priorities and division between these calls?	The Explainable AI opportunity focuses on fundamental research that could deliver a step change in our ability to understand, interpret and explain the behaviour of future AI systems. The Transformative Sustainable AI Technologies opportunity focuses on developing more sustainable AI technologies, including reducing the environmental and resource costs associated with AI systems. Applicants are expected to submit to the call that best matches the primary focus of the proposed work. The two calls are being assessed and managed separately and there will be no sharing of review pools. There is an application limit on the Explainable AI call only which states you may be involved in no more than two applications submitted to this funding opportunity and only one of these can be as project lead.
For an early-career researcher, if they submit this proposal as a project lead or a co-lead, would it affect their eligibility for the New Investigator Award?	If ECRs are applying as project led, the Explainable AI call will make them ineligible for the NIA. However, including an early-career colleague as a Project Co-Lead on the Explainable AI application will not

	automatically affect their future NIA eligibility. If the application is unsuccessful, they remain fully eligible. If it is successful, they can remain eligible as long as their share of the funding and supervised PDRA time stays below the relevant research independence thresholds as listed under NIA eligibility .
Do you consider applications from ECR/MCR PIs supported by more senior academics?	Yes, this is welcome and all project roles should be clearly explained and justified within the application.
What organisations are eligible for this call? For example, would the NHS be eligible?	Standard UKRI eligibility applies to this call. Read more about organisation eligibility .

Remit and scope

For researchers coming from scientific disciplines beyond AI, how would UKRI distinguish an in-scope proposal that advances the fundamental methodology of explainable AI from an out-of-scope proposal that primarily applies existing XAI methods to a scientific problem?	This call is intended to support speculative, high-risk fundamental research that could deliver a step change in the explainability of future AI systems, rather than projects that primarily apply existing explainable AI techniques to a domain problem. It aims to support research that advances explainable AI itself and pushes the boundaries of current understanding. The key consideration is whether the primary contribution is a fundamental advance in AI explainability with potential wider applicability, rather than the use of existing explainable AI methods to solve a scientific challenge in a particular discipline. For more information, applicants should refer to the Scope: explainable AI section of the call, which provides several
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	illustrative examples of relevant research areas. These examples are intended as guidance only and are not exhaustive or prescriptive.
How will reviewers distinguish a genuinely high risk, high reward research idea from one that is simply too uncertain to fund?	As this opportunity is specifically designed to support high-risk, high-reward research, we expect that the reviewers will not expect certainty of success. They will look for a credible and well-justified approach to an ambitious research challenge, where the potential rewards are significant if successful. A proposal is more likely to be considered high risk, high reward when it has a plausible route to delivering a step change in explainable AI, even if the outcome is uncertain. By contrast, proposals may be viewed as too uncertain if they lack a clear scientific rationale, credible methodology, or convincing pathway to generating meaningful new knowledge.

Distributed Peer Review (DPR) process

DPR will be a new approach for most applicant teams, and there will be a wide range of experience with all types of reviewing. Will there be training provided, beyond the guidance document?	The use of distributed peer review (DPR) in this opportunity reflects UKRI's commitment to testing innovative approaches to funding and assessment that can support appropriate risk-taking, faster decision-making, and a more adaptive funding system. No additional training is planned beyond the published DPR rules and guidance documents. Applicants and nominated reviewers are therefore encouraged to familiarise themselves with the guidance provided as part of the funding opportunity. Please check the published guidance on DPR here: UKRI-050826-DPR-Guidelines-NextGenerationArtificialIntelligence-ExplainableAI.pdf
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This grant call will use distributed peer review for applicants who are also assessors and review other proposals submitted to the same funding opportunity to decide who gets funding. There is also no PL response or panel step. How is DPR a fair process when different applicants can review other applications? What mechanism can be used to confirm such review process is fair and not falling into a zero-sum game?	The DPR process includes checks to help keep the assessment fair. Reviewers must follow the assessment guidance and declare any conflicts of interest. Reviews are also considered alongside those from other reviewers, rather than relying on a single opinion. UKRI will use moderators to check that reviewers have adhered to the guidelines for this funding opportunity. These moderators will advise on any reviews that should be excluded from the assessment process. If an applicant does attempt to 'game' the overall scoring system (for example, by giving consistently negative reviews and low scores without clear justification), the application they are involved with may not proceed. Further details are available in the funding opportunity guidance under Additional Information: UKRI-050826-DPR-Guidelines-NextGenerationArtificialIntelligence-ExplainableAI.pdf.
How will distributed peer review accommodate unconventional interdisciplinary proposals, particularly where reviewers disagree strongly about their potential? How will reviewers be assigned to applications? Will you try to match expertise or is it more a random assignment?	By using different reviewer pools and an allocation algorithm, proposals will be assigned to reviewers in such a way that scoring an application has no bearing on the ranking of the reviewer's own application. The larger number of reviewers that distributed peer review uses provides a breadth of views. Further details are available in the funding opportunity guidance under Additional Information: UKRI-050826-DPR-Guidelines-NextGenerationArtificialIntelligence-ExplainableAI.pdf.

Is the DPR responsibility only for PL, or Co-Ls as well?	Either 1 or 2 reviewers from the project team must be nominated to participate in the DPR process. This should include the Project Lead and can include a Co-Lead if appropriate. The applicant team should only nominate individuals with the capacity, knowledge and confidence to provide constructive, comprehensive, quality reviews.
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Core team and partners

Is working with a company and using their AI technology acceptable and would a cash-in-kind provision by the company be acceptable to enable the project? Do you allow industrial partners?	This opportunity is open to organisations that meet the standard eligibility requirements. While businesses cannot be part of the core project team, they may contribute to the research as project partners. A project partner is a collaborating organisation that plays an integral role in the proposed research. Contributions may be direct, such as cash funding, donated equipment or resources, or staff seconded to the project. Contributions may also be indirect or in kind, such as access to the project partner's equipment, datasets, facilities, or other resources. More information about roles in funding applications can be found here: Roles in funding applications: eligibility, responsibilities and costings guidance – UKRI
Given the fixed 01 February 2027 start date, what flexibility is there if a PDRA cannot actually start on that date?	A PDRA does not need to start on 01 February 2027 and may begin later. However, applicants should explain how the

	project will still be delivered successfully within the fixed 24-month duration, as reviewers may consider the impact of any delayed recruitment. Your research team make up should be informed by the aims and objectives of your application
Can there be two PIs from two different institutions? What is an acceptable time allocation for the project lead? Can this vary throughout the lifetime of the project but remain high between the co-leads?	Co-leadership is allowed but only one PI can officially be named on the grant – their RO will administer the grant. Joint leads may be named under ‘Applicant team and capability to deliver’. Any time allocations should be justified in the application. There is no upper or lower limit, and it can vary as long as the project is appropriately managed.
Can you give a bit more detail on how you see international partners working? Can these be from any country? If they will play a significant role in the research how do we account for their time, even if it isn't costed?	Applicants should follow the usual UKRI guidance on international Project Partners and any associated eligibility and costing requirements. More information here: https://www.ukri.org/publications/roles-in-funding-applications/roles-in-funding-applications-eligibility-responsibilities-and-costings-guidance/ For this opportunity, international researchers may only be included as a Project Co-Lead (International) where they are eligible under the UKRI-RCN Money Follows Cooperation agreement. Other international collaborators should normally be included as project partners and therefore cannot be a researcher on the grant. Where there is a genuine requirement for a specific, discrete piece of work to be undertaken by an external organisation, applicants may wish to consider whether a subcontracting



	arrangement is appropriate. Any such costs would need to be fully justified in line with UKRI funding guidance and the nature of the work being undertaken. We would not normally expect the same contribution to be described both as a project partner role and a subcontracted activity. If applicants are considering a combination of arrangements, they should clearly justify the rationale and ensure there is no duplication of support.
Can we have an interdisciplinary project team and what is the acceptable level?	Interdisciplinary approaches are welcome. However, we aim to support research that is working towards a demonstrable impact on AI technology and build the UK's capacity to design and deploy explainable AI technologies. We will not fund applications that consist of majority non-technical research such as purely social science, legal, policy or ethical studies. It is important to justify the applicant team capability to deliver the proposed work within the application.
Talent pipeline: can PhD students be hired?	Studentships are not an eligible cost on this opportunity. Eligible core team roles are indicated in the funding opportunity. More information can be found here: https://www.ukri.org/publications/roles-in-funding-applications/roles-in-funding-applications-eligibility-responsibilities-and-costings-guidance/