

NERC Exploring the Frontiers 2026

FAQ

This document is intended to supplement the webinar that was held on 17th September 2026. If you have questions that are not answered here, we advise you listen to the recording which is available on the [Exploring the Frontiers Funding Finder](#). If after listening, you still have a question please email exploringfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org.

Eligibility:

1. Can I include international Co-Leads (with associated costs paid via the grant)?

Excluding Norwegian collaborators, International Co-Leads can NOT be included on EtF applications. International collaborators outside of Norway should be included as Project Partners.

2. Can I include international Project Partners?

International project partners may be included however are only eligible to claim incidental costs such as travel and subsistence; they would not be able to claim salary costs from the award.

3. Can a postdoc or PhD student be included in the core team in this opportunity?

Yes, they can be. Please see the “Who can apply” section at [Exploring the frontiers of environmental research 2026 – UKRI](#) for both institutional and individual eligibility policies. This guidance explains the requirements for all the named role types for this opportunity

4. Is there a minimum or maximum FTE for PLs?

Project Leads are expected to cost themselves between 0.2 and 1 FTE. Please be aware that team members may not claim more than 100% FTE summed across all active UKRI grants they are involved with.

5. I am a UKRI Fellow – can I apply as a Project Lead?

NERC Independent Research Fellows are required to cost their time at 100% of their FTE to the fellowship programme, however, can dedicate an average of 6 hours per week, unpaid, to other research activities. As EtF is a shorter award duration than the IRF, 0.2 for the duration of EtF is possible, however this time and associated overheads cannot be charged to the EtF.

6. I am currently on a fixed-term contract, OR not yet employed by the host institution. Is it OK if the host institution guarantees my contract will last until the end of the grant IF the grant is awarded?

Yes, it is sufficient for the host institution to provide assurance at the point of application that the applicant's contract would be extended, or that an appropriate contract would be put in place, should the application be successful.

Assessment process:

1. How will the applications be divided and assigned?

Applications will be assigned to panels based on remit area. Each panel will then be subdivided into two 'pools' with funding divided between pools. PLs will be assigned to different pools from the applicants they review. As a result, they are not directly 'competing' against the applicants whose applications they review.

2. How will NERC know my expertise?

As well as providing key words for applications, to assist with matching applications to assessors, we are asking PLs to describe their area(s) of expertise using keywords – there is a dedicated section within the TFS form to gather this information.

3. What if I am not an expert in the areas I am assessing?

The allocation algorithm aims to align expertise as far as possible using the information provided, however we acknowledge that this won't guarantee coverage in all areas. You will therefore be reviewing as a generalist. The reviewing step will be completed by applicants as generalist reviewers in accordance with the published assessment criteria. All applicants should therefore have written their application with the assessment criteria in mind. If you have declined a review because it is outside your area of expertise, we will resend you the review invitation.

4. Would any reviewers be used from outside the pool of applicants e.g. if there is no-one with the required expertise amongst the applicants?

In the unlikely case that we are unable to match an application to enough reviewers within the applicant pool, NERC reserves the right to conduct traditional peer review for affected applications.

5. What should my review be based on and will I receive training?

For each review you will be expected to carefully read only the **Vision, Approach, and Ethics and Responsible Research and Innovation** sections of each application

assigned to you, and provide a score as well as a written justification for your score. A webinar will be hosted on the **6th January 2027** for applicants, specifically on the DPR process. This webinar will only be open to Project Leads who have submitted to this opportunity, however we encourage anyone interested in receiving peer review training more generally to join the [NERC Peer Review College](#) and attend the college training.

6. How many applications will I be expected to review?

Each applicant will be assigned 6 to 8 (maximum) applications to review.

7. What if I am conflicted on an application?

You must make us aware of any potential conflicts of interest within one week of receiving your assigned applications for review (i.e. by 13th January 2027 at the latest).

Please ensure you have checked in detail all those named in the application and not just the project lead. Do not decline the invite in TFS until agreed with a member of the NERC team. If you decline a review on TFS without contacting NERC the application will be re-assigned to you. **Full UKRI guidance on conflicts of interest can be found [here](#).**

Failure to inform us of conflicts **via email** before the deadline will result in your application being removed from the process.

If a conflict is agreed by yourself and NERC you will be assigned a new application to review. If you are unable to provide a minimum of 6 reviews your application will be removed from the opportunity.

8. Can my Co-Lead review for me?

No. For this opportunity, only Project Leads will be signing up to the reviewer principles outlined in TFS, therefore applications cannot be shared with any other collaborators on the project.

9. How will NERC ensure there is no game playing?

A common concern with DPR is that applicants may give tactically lower scores, in order to improve their own relative position. NERC would like to reassure applicants that protections are in place to ensure that it is extremely difficult for applicants to 'game' the system. For example:

- PLs will be assigned to a different reviewing pool from the applicants they review. As a result, they are not directly 'competing' against the applicants whose proposals they review.
- No two applicants from the same institution will receive each other's application.

- To mitigate against collusion, we will use an allocation algorithm that avoids having any reciprocal pairs/triads within which PLs review one another.
- If a PL does attempt to ‘game’ the overall scoring system (for example, by giving consistently low scores without clear justification), their own application may not proceed.

10. Scoring criteria

Scores should be given in **whole numbers** ranging from 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest). Additional scoring guidance has been developed specifically for this scheme to be used alongside the UKRI standard definitions provided in TFS. This additional guidance will be provided to applicants before the DPR webinar on 6th January 2027.

11. Will there be an opportunity to respond to reviewer comments?

No, the DPR process does not include an applicant response or a panel stage. However, applicants will receive a higher number of reviews than traditional peer review. The final score will be a mean average of all the scores given in the review process.

Timeline:

1. When will I get access to my assigned applications to review?

You will be granted access to your assigned applications to review on the 6th January 2027. You must let us know by 13th January if you are conflicted on an application. Full UKRI guidance on conflicts of interest can be found [here](#).

2. How long will I have to complete my reviews?

You will have 3 weeks from the 6th January 2027 to complete your reviews, i.e. score all applications assigned to you and submit your justification for each score you have provided. Failing to complete your assigned reviews on time will lead to the automatic rejection of the proposal in which you are the applicant.

3. What if I can't complete my reviews within the deadline due to exceptional circumstances?

Please contact exploringfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org as soon as possible to discuss this with the NERC team.

4. How will NERC make decisions?

Funding decisions will be made within reviewer pools, using a mean average of all scores provided. We will use a tiered approach to make decisions, using assessment tools such as banding, randomised and strategic allocation so that the aims of the opportunity are met.

If a tiered approach is used, applications are assigned to one of three 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

Scores will **not** be rounded to whole numbers and tiering will depend on the scores received. 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**, balancing the remit of funded research in such a way that is appropriate to the funding opportunity aims.

5. When will decisions and feedback be communicated?

We aim to complete the review process within 4 months of the opportunity closing and therefore hope to give decisions in March 2027. You will receive reviews and scores via TFS at the point of decision.

General enquiries:

1. Remit

The research must sit predominantly within **NERC's research areas**. We will work with other research councils to ensure that applications close to remit boundaries are processed by the most appropriate lead council via the most appropriate funding opportunity. We encourage you to contact us first to discuss your application if you believe your research may cross research council boundaries. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of some projects, we would remind you to write your applications in a way that will allow generalist reviewers to assess your application. If necessary, NERC reserves the right to conduct traditional peer review to get sufficient reviews.

2. Can I use AI to write my review?

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. Documents provided

for review are confidential and may not be used as input for generative models. Please refer to the [UKRI policy on the use of generative AI](#) in application assessment and the penalties of research misconduct.

3. What constitutes a conflict of interest?

During the assignment process NERC has undertaken checks to ensure that organisational conflicts have been resolved to the best of our abilities. We accept that there may be additional personal conflicts however, that we are unable to predict when assigning applications. Full UKRI guidance on conflicts of interest can be found [here](#).

UKRI acknowledges that individuals working in the same research and innovation field may know each other. This does not prevent them from assessing an application. However, as assessors, you must declare any interest which you feel would prevent you giving an unbiased assessment. If you are unsure, please contact us directly to discuss the nature of your conflict.