UK Research and Innovation

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FAQ: Small-satellite missions sandpit, UKRI Space Programme
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Aims and scope of the sandpit

Are you able to share the sandpit challenges ahead of the application deadline so the appropriate individual from our institution can be put forward to apply?
No, the challenges will not be shared ahead of the application deadline or sandpit. This is because we do not want individuals to arrive at the sandpit with pre-formed ideas. The aim of the sandpit is to develop the satellite mission concepts as a team during the event. Applicants should focus their application on the expertise, perspectives and experience they would bring to the sandpit. Participants will be selected based on the published criteria and their ability to contribute to the sandpit environment, rather than on their fit to a particular challenge.

Can participants propose a specific real-world challenge they are interested in developing a mission concept for or are the real-world challenges provided by specific challenge-holders at the start of the sandpit?
We will be setting clear challenges to explore, and we expect concepts to develop through collaboration and interaction with other participants. We are looking for people to bring their expertise and experience and to be open to the process, rather than bring their own projects to work on. Because of this, we are not asking participants to come to the event with a challenge to solve. If you are successful in your application, and you have an idea for a real-world challenge you would like to solve, you may explore this in a collaborative manner during the event.

Will the end-user challenges have more of a UK focus or global focus?
End-user challenges have been curated by the sandpit mentors. While some challenges will be applicable on a global scale, some challenges may primarily prioritise UK needs.

Are all selected participants required to work on defence related concepts, or will participants have the choice to work on civil-only projects?
During the sandpit there will be both defence and civil projects proposed. You may choose to input only into the civil projects and will not be forced to work on defence-focused projects if you do not wish to.

Can you define what size of satellite is in scope for this sandpit?
We do not have strict guidelines on the exact size of the satellites to be included as part of the mission concepts generated during the sandpit. In general, we define a small satellite to be anything from a 1U satellite up to approximately a 1-tonne class satellite. We are not looking to develop payloads for external platforms.

Is the expected outcome of the sandpit a completed phase 0 study, or is this the expected outcome of the funded activity open to invited projects only?

The expected outcome of the sandpit is the generation of small satellite Earth observation mission concept proposals that, if selected at the end of the sandpit, may be taken forward into Phase 0 studies. It is not the intention that a full Phase 0 study be completed during the sandpit.

It can be difficult to ascertain if a new mission concept will be successful without completing a given amount of technical work, which may be difficult to complete during the sandpit. How will this be addressed?
The aim of the sandpit is to generate ideas for novel small satellite Earth observation mission concepts. If an idea shows sufficient promise, project leads will be invited to apply for funding for a Phase 0 study, during which the technical evaluation work will be completed.

Given the emphasis on integrating Earth observation with adjacent technologies like quantum, AI, advanced manufacturing, and advanced connectivity technologies, is the panel looking for project teams that explicitly span across all or multiple of these technology areas?
Yes, in order to explore as many novel mission concepts as possible during the sandpit, it is the intention to bring together individuals that span across as many of these technology areas as possible.

Funding available and context of the UKRI Space Programme

If selected for funding after the sandpit has ended, what is the expected end-result in terms of the satellite mission's final development stage?
Within the current envelope of funding of this opportunity, the expected end-result of the grant is a completed Phase 0 study of the small satellite Earth observation mission that was proposed at the sandpit. While there is unallocated budget within the UKRI programme for further development, this is not being committed to this work at this stage.

Of the 5-6 projects potentially invited to submit proposals for funding at the end of the sandpit, how many are likely to be selected?
We anticipate inviting around 5 to 6 concepts to submit full applications following the sandpit. The funding envelope has been designed with the expectation that multiple projects will be supported. Therefore, we expect that most, and potentially all, of the concept invited could receive funding. The number of projects ultimately funded will depend on the quality, scope and cost of the applications received, sharing up to £1.87 million (of which UKRI will pay 80% of the full economic cost).

If selected to apply for the Phase 0 funding, will the funding be awarded to all institutions named on the proposal or will only the individual applying receive funding? Is it possible to include further institutions on the final proposal even if they did not take part in the sandpit?
The funding can be awarded to a single institution or to multiple institutions where one organisation acts as the lead on behalf of the project. Joint applications must be submitted by the project lead's organisation.

The aim of the sandpit is to develop the best ideas and create the most appropriate teams to deliver innovative and ambitious mission concepts. We expect that you may need to bring in others from outside of the sandpit to deliver the project itself, including additional project co-leads or other grant roles. This may be colleagues at your organisation or from other organisations eligible for UKRI funding.
We also encourage you to consider potential project partners. These can be from organisations that are not eligible for funding, e.g. industrial partners, but who contribute to the project either in-cash or in-kind.

Eligibility

Can more than one person from my organisation apply?
Yes. Applications are assessed on an individual basis. Multiple people from the same organisation may apply, although selection decisions will be based on building a balanced cohort of expertise, career stage and region.

Can PhD Students take part in the sandpit?
We welcome applications from all career stages providing applicants can meet UKRI's individual eligibility criteria for either a project lead or project co-lead. As participants are expected to be able to take a leading role in any future funded project, applicants should ensure they would be eligible to hold a UKRI grant by the time of any potential award. Prospective applicants are encouraged to discuss their eligibility with their research organisation before applying.

Can businesses apply?
The sandpit is only open to researchers and innovators from UK research organisations who meet UKRI's standard organisational eligibility criteria. However, we encourage businesses, government and third sector organisations to contribute as project partners. If you are interested in getting involved as a potential partner, please contact us at smallsatsandpit@ukri.org.

What security checks will applicants be subject to?
Applicants will be subject to a Baseline Personnel Security Standard (BPSS) in line with the UKRI Trusted Research and Innovation principles. More advanced security clearance is not required to take part in the sandpit.

Are non-British nationals or those who hold British National Overseas (BNO) status eligible to take part in the sandpit? Will these individuals also be eligible to lead or co-lead follow-on projects?
This opportunity is open to all UK and non-UK nationals provided they meet UKRI's individual eligibility criteria and pass the BPSS check.

Application, assessment and success criteria

Is there any guidance on which individual capabilities should be highlighted in the application, given the specific end-user challenges are currently not publicly available? Should the application present more like a personal statement?
The application form is designed to understand your motivation for joining the sandpit as well as what relevant expertise you will bring. This expertise can be technical capabilities in any form of discipline that you feel is relevant to designing satellite mission concepts, or the ability to network and work effectively in a team environment. The sandpit process rapidly creates new project teams, and it is important that you are able to successfully form new relationships as well as share and build upon new ideas in a collaborative manner.

Should the ideal applicant have a specific technical or scientific expertise relevant to the user application or rather be a creative scientist or engineer who is aware of the wider capabilities of their institution?
A sandpit is an open and collaborative environment which will require participating individuals to have a balance of open-mindedness, creativity, and the ability to demonstrate connections within their institution or associated research community. Alongside this, it is important that the participating individual has the required technical expertise in a relevant field to support novel small satellite mission concept ideas.

What range of disciplines and experience will be considered in the selection process?
We are looking to convene individuals with expertise over a large range of disciplines, including advanced technologies relevant to the generation of new small satellite Earth observation mission concepts. We are not prescriptive in the types of technologies we are looking for. We also welcome applications from relevant socio-economic disciplines if they also have sufficient technical knowledge to support overall mission design. If you believe that your expertise or experience is relevant, please apply including details of why you believe your experience is relevant. We want to understand how this experience would allow you to contribute to a collaborative, interdisciplinary environment. As well as technical expertise, we are looking for individuals who are enthusiastic, are open to new ideas, and who are able to explore challenges from various angles.

Would an individual with a legal background be eligible to take part in the sandpit event or are you looking for individuals within purely scientific or technical disciplines?
Having a legal discipline is not outside of the scope for the sandpit event as this represents an important aspect of the design of a new small satellite mission concept. It would be beneficial if the individual also possessed sufficient technical knowledge to contribute to the overall mission design.

Can two researchers from the same institution apply if they are experts in different discipline areas?
Yes. Applications are assessed on an individual basis. Multiple people from the same organisation may apply, although selection decisions will be based on building a balanced cohort.

What is the expected acceptance rate for the sandpit? i.e. how many applications are you expecting for the 30 available spots?
As this is the first opportunity to become available through the UKRI Space Programme, we do not know how many applications we may receive. As such, it is not possible to provide an acceptance rate for applications into this sandpit activity.

Sandpit event

Will you be able to share a list of participants ahead of the sandpit?
At present we have no plans to share a list of participants ahead of the sandpit. We ask participants to arrive at the sandpit with an open mind, without any pre-conceived ideas or teams. We may ask participants to share biographies with the cohort, with permission, closer to the event.

What is the expected time commitment for the sandpit, including any work required before the sandpit has started, and any work after the sandpit has ended?
The sandpit will take place over 5.5 days. Two of these days will take place consecutively in person, and the remaining sessions will take place online. For the sandpit process to work effectively, we expect full attendance at all sessions. This includes allocating the full day to all online sandpit activities. This is essential for the successful development of collaborations and ideas. No prior work is expected ahead of the sandpit.
Some selected teams may be invited to apply for 11-months of funding. If selected, you will have 5 weeks to prepare a submission for this after the sandpit has ended.

Can I attend virtually instead of the in-person sessions?
No, full participation in the format set out for the sandpit is expected. We will however work with you to make sure that any adjustments or requirements you require to support your attendance are considered.

Is there a recommended minimum or maximum number of sandpit participants that should make up a single project team?
We are not prescriptive in the maximum and minimum number of sandpit participants that can make up a single project team. The sandpit will be facilitated by a professional facilitation team, supported by a team of mentors. This team will guide project teams during the event, and it is possible for a participant to contribute to more than one project team at a time.

What is a 'live peer review'? Is this approach likely to be rolled out for other opportunities going forward?
During the sandpit, project teams will be asked to present their mission concepts to the wider sandpit cohort. This is an opportunity to receive live, constructive feedback from all participants, acting as a 'live peer review' session. All final assessments will be carried out by a team comprising of the sandpit director and sandpit mentors only.
The sandpit approach is one of several assessment and funding mechanisms used by UKRI. Different approaches are used depending on the objectives of the opportunity.

How will IP be managed?
There are no special IP arrangements associated with participation in the sandpit itself. The sandpit director and mentors will agree to the UKRI's panel protocols code of practice, including confidentiality, before taking on any sandpit activity, including accessing any Expression of interest applications. Participants will also be asked to agree to a code of practice, including the expectation to behave professionally and respect any confidential information and ideas shared by others during the activity.
Should a concept progress to the funding stage, any intellectual property arising from the funded project will normally be managed in accordance with the participating organisations' existing policies and any collaboration agreements established between project partners. Participants should therefore consider IP, data sharing and exploitation arrangements as part of the development of any project that progresses beyond the sandpit. If specific IP arrangements are required between collaborating organisations, these would be a matter for the project partners and their organisations to agree.

Further information on IP can be found on the UKRI intellectual property strategic statement: https://www.ukri.org/publications/ukri-sets-expectations-for-effective-ip-management-and-use/ukri-intellectual-property-strategic-statement/