

MULTIDISCIPLINARY SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY RESEARCH CENTRES (SBRCs)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND APPLICATION GUIDANCE

These frequently asked questions are provided as guidance to applicants on common queries. Applicants should contact us if further clarification is required or if they have queries which are not covered here or in the main call text.

- Questions on the scope and purpose of the SBRCs
- Questions on industrial collaboration
- Questions on deliverables and monitoring
- Questions on funding and equipment
- Questions on the application and assessment process

QUESTIONS ON THE SCOPE OF THE SBRCs

- 1. Should Centres be focussed on a specific scientific question, sector, or industrial outcome, or can they be aimed at underpinning technologies / research?**

The scope of the Centres has deliberately been left open to the applicants. Therefore, they may be focussed or underpinning, according to the strengths of the applicants. However, Centres should have a clearly articulated vision and be in line with the ambitions described in the [Synthetic Biology Roadmap](#).

- 2. What is the balance of biology to engineering anticipated within the Centres?**

Although it is expected that all Centres will incorporate some aspects of biology and engineering, the balance of the disciplines should be appropriate to the objectives of the Centre. This may mean that some proposals are heavily skewed towards one discipline over the other. It is important that applicants consider the need for multidisciplinary within the Centres, even if the proposal is predominantly either biology or engineering oriented.

- 3. Who is eligible to apply to this call?**

Standard BBSRC guidelines for managed mode funding will apply. In preparing your application you should ensure that all of the applicants are eligible to apply for BBSRC funding. If you have any queries about eligibility, please contact BBSRC by emailing SynBioRC@bbsrc.ac.uk with 'eligibility' in the subject heading.

Applications are equally welcomed from investigators who are established in the field and those who are new.

The New Investigator, IPA, and LINK schemes do not apply to this call.

- 4. Can Centres be multi-institutional / Regional?**

We do not intend to establish a group of Regional Centres through this call.

If appropriate, multi-institutional Centres are welcome but must demonstrate evidence of:

- added value and synergy with the partners bringing additional expertise to the partnership;
- genuine aim of collaboration and sharing;
- strong management to enable true integration of all institutions;
- a coherent vision and programme rather than a disparate set of activities;
- how equipment will be effectively managed and run across the consortium.

All applications should be on a **single** Je-S form **submitted by the Principal Investigator**. Applications that involve investigators from different institutions that are not submitted on a single form will be withdrawn from the scheme.

5. Are there fundamentals that every centre must have?

Applications will be assessed by external peer-review and a specially convened Panel. The Panel will assess the proposals against the scope (see call text) and aims (see call text), taking into account the reviewers' comments, the applicants' response and their own expertise.

The Panel will also consider:

- the excellence of the scientific proposal
- the strategic importance of the Centre to BBSRC, EPSRC and the applicants' institutions
- appropriateness of the pathways to economic and social impact
- timeliness and promise
- value for money
- the training and career development potential offered by the Centre
- the long-term sustainability of the Centre

6. Do the people involved in the proposal have to be physically co-located?

No, however applicants should consider the need to demonstrate multidisciplinary working and effective collaboration.

7. We would like some help in identifying links / collaborators at other institutions, can the councils help with this?

The list of attendees at the workshop will be circulated after the meeting. Other good sources of information are the nine research council-funded synthetic biology networks and the synthetic biology Special Interest Group, which has nearly 700 members.

8. Is it expected that the Centres will work together?

Although there is an element of competition between the Centres, they should be outward-facing and linked in to developments in other Centres and appropriate initiatives in order to exploit synergies and complementarities. Longer-term, the councils would like to see some collaboration within the funded portfolio. To facilitate this, there will be an annual meeting for the Centres to disseminate results and share best practice. It will also be important to keep abreast of advancements in the wider-UK, and International communities.

9. Are Centres wholly focussed on wet-lab research or dry-lab research allowed?

Due to the requirement for multidisciplinary and integration, proposals that are wholly focussed on theoretical or on wet-lab research are not eligible for this call.

10. Are proposals that focus largely on the ethical, legal and social aspects (ELSA) of synthetic biology eligible?

It is expected that all proposals will show consideration of ELSA; however this should not form the main focus of a Centre.

11. Are EPSRC and BBSRC proposing to fund the social sciences aspects of any successful Centres?

(Please also read the answer to question 10).

ESRC have had input to the shaping of this call, although they are not contributing financially at present, as such, BBSRC/EPSCRC will fund the social sciences aspects of a successful proposal, as long as it is fully justified. However, applicants should consider the balance within their proposed Centre – the social science aspect of a proposal could be a specific activity or a more general component - but the overall balance of the Centre must fit within BBSRC and / or EPSRC's remit.

12. Are the MRC engaged in this call?

(Answer provided by Dr Nathan Richardson, MRC)

The MRC are interested in supporting synthetic biology, and have had input into the development of the call, but are not contributing financially to this call for proposals. While there may be aspects of proposals that are relevant to the MRC, proposals should primarily address the remit of the funding Councils, BBSRC and EPSRC. MRC may in the future consider co-funding proposals on a case-by-case basis.

QUESTIONS ON INDUSTRIAL COLLABORATION

13. What is the expected / desired level of industrial engagement?

BBSRC and EPSRC remit is within the TRL 1 to 3 space, although Centres may position themselves at any point along the translational pathway to industry. It is expected that they will clearly demonstrate what the route(s) to industry would be and identify in their 'Pathways to Impact' statement which industrial partners would be most relevant to engage with. Applicants should consider the impact, translation and applications of their research from the outset.

14. Do we need a letter of support from our industrial partners?

Yes, a letter of support from the industry partner(s) should be attached to the proposal outlining their contribution to the project and describing their involvement. In addition, a letter from the institutions TTO or equivalent should be attached outlining that, if the application is successful, a collaboration agreement will be put in place between all partners before research commences in line with section GC21 of the [Cross-Research Council Research Grant Terms and Conditions](#). BBSRC and EPSRC may ask to see a signed copy of the collaboration agreement before the grant begins.

15. Does the proposal require a letter of support from the TTO of the lead institution or from all of the institutions involved?

In addition to the letters of support from all Project Partners, we will need one letter of support from the lead institution TTO confirming that a signed collaborative agreement between all partners will be provided before research commences.

16. Where should the details of industrial partners be included in the application?

Industrial partners should be entered into JeS as 'project partners'. The case for support should describe the benefits of the collaboration to the Centre. The 'Pathways to Impact' statement should outline how the collaboration will increase the likely impacts of the research. Applicants may wish to consider getting input from their partners in addressing this.

Applicants should refer to the BBSRC Grants Guide sections 2.41-2.44 for further information about project partners.

17. Do the Industrial Partnership Award (IPA) and LINK schemes apply?

No, while engagement with industry is welcomed, these schemes do not apply to this call.

18. Can our industrial partners access equipment bought on the SBRC grant, and do they have to pay access fees?

Yes, industrial partners can have access to equipment bought on the SBRC grant.

Applicants should apply for all of the running and staffing costs associated with a piece of equipment (at 80% FEC); this will then make it free at the point of access for academic users. Industrial partners may be charged an access fee (e.g. the additional 20% FEC costs).

Please also see the answer to question 35, where further information on access to equipment is given.

19. Do we have to include all of our industrial partners on the scientific advisory board?

Although a wholly 'internal' board would not be acceptable, it is at the discretion of the applicants who they decide to invite to be on the scientific advisory board; whoever is included (or not included) should be justified within the application.

QUESTIONS ON LEADERSHIP, DELIVERABLES AND MONITORING

20. Should we appoint a Director?

In the experience of the Research Councils, it is imperative to the success of major investments of this nature for there to be both meaningful scientific and strategic direction. One model is for these roles to be separated between individuals with the appropriate skills to deliver the different functions. In this case, in addition to a lead PI (who will have overall oversight of the scientific direction of the Centre) each Centre will appoint a Director who will have oversight of the strategic direction and management. The lead PI and Director should demonstrate a significant commitment to the Centre.

Alternatively, if the lead PI is to be the Director, they must clearly demonstrate their ability to deliver the management and leadership aspects required by such a Centre, in addition to their scientific expertise, and dedicate a substantial proportion of their time to the role.

Applications should also outline contingencies for succession planning.

21. Do we need a governance and management plan?

Yes; Management and governance requirements should be appropriate to the size, complexity and needs of the Centre, and professional project management resource can be included, if appropriately justified.

22. What are the deliverables and long-term objectives of the Centres?

Depending on the scope of the successful Centres the deliverables and long-term objectives could be very different. Applicants should articulate the deliverables and long-term objectives of the Centre based upon the scope and overall vision. It is expected that the Centres would be self-sustaining by the end of the 5 years funding period.

23. How will the Centres be monitored?

The Centres must appoint a Scientific Advisory Board, to which the Director and lead-PI will report on an annual basis. BBSRC and EPSRC representatives must be invited to the SAB meetings. The research councils will organise an annual meeting for the successful grant holders; representatives of each Centre will be expected to attend.

In addition, the research councils will commission a mid-term review after three years, which will be used to provide feedback on the progress against the deliverables, and guidance for the final two years of funding.

QUESTIONS ON FUNDING AND EQUIPMENT

24. Is it anticipated that more than one Centre will be funded in the same area?

Each Centre should play to its strengths and ideally it would be synergistic with the other Centres. The primary criteria for assessment by reviewers and the Assessment Panel will be scientific excellence. A diversity of approaches / topics is preferred but it is not an absolute requirement that each Centre addresses a different topic.

25. What is the requirement for upfront commitment from the hosting organisation(s)?

Centres will need to demonstrate strong leadership, strategic commitment and a strong alliance with the hosting organisation's strategy; this includes demonstration of how the application integrates with the institution's own priorities. Proposals **must** include an institutional letter of support from the Pro-Vice Chancellor or equivalent of each institution on the proposal.

Some examples of institutional commitment could be:

- plans for longer-term sustainability after the 5 year funded period

- dedicated space
- appointment of a dedicated Director and / or significant commitment from the lead PI / Director to the running of the Centre (not less than 30%).
 - this could include a commitment to the continuation of the Director and / or lead PI's post after the duration of the Centre
- there should also be contingencies for succession planning within the application
- contributions towards capital equipment or staff posts

26. What do you mean by capital costs?

Any costs which are solely and entirely related to the acquisition of a major asset can be classed as capital.

27. By capital equipment items, do you mean items over £10k?

Yes

28. Are we permitted to apply for capital equipment items between £10k and the OJEU threshold of £113,057 (excluding VAT)?

Yes. The normal requirement for the host institution to provide a 50% contribution to the cost of equipment in this price range will not be mandatory in this instance. However, where a Research Council contribution of greater than 50% is sought, this must be well justified. A significant commitment to the Centres will be expected from the host institution(s) (see above).

29. Are we permitted to apply for capital equipment items over the OJEU threshold of £113,057 (excluding VAT)?

Yes. In this instance, items over the OJEU threshold will not need an additional business case. However, clear justification for these items should be included in the justification of resources; the maximum length of this attachment has been increased in order to accommodate the extra justification(s). The cost of the requested items must be based on tangible market evidence (see question on quotations below).

30. Are quotations for items of equipment over £10k or over the OJEU threshold of £113,057 (excluding VAT) required?

Whilst the final purchases must be made using legal and robust procurement procedures in line with EU competitive tender requirements, applicants are invited to apply using early estimates, based on tangible market evidence. Awards will then be made using an 'up-to' capital amount, where the final award is informed by full procurement procedure.

31. Bearing in mind the forthcoming funding for DNA synthesis, should we apply for DNA synthesis equipment as part of an SBRC?

The councils have not yet decided how the DNA synthesis funding will be implemented, so if DNA synthesis equipment is required for a Centre, then it should be requested as part of this call.

32. Can I ask for equipment as part of an SBRC proposal and the current BBSRC ALERT call?

The councils are aware that there are currently a number of calls open to applicants and will be working closely to ensure funding is not duplicated.

33. Are we permitted to include depreciation costs?

Depreciation cannot be claimed on any equipment where the Research Councils have funded the capital costs, so it is not an eligible cost under the call.

34. Are we permitted to apply for running costs for capital equipment items?

Yes - these costs are not classed as capital. Applicants should apply for all of the running and staffing costs associated with their equipment (at 80% FEC).

35. If we make equipment bought with an SBRC grant available to other academics are we allowed to charge access fees?

Applicants should apply for all of the running and staffing costs associated with a piece of equipment (at 80% FEC) and as such the equipment should then be provided to other academics as free at the point of access.

It is assumed that demand for the equipment from academic users and collaborative partners will be strong, and that it is unlikely that grant holders will have spare capacity to offer service access. If a service is provided – i.e. non-collaborator access to the equipment where the grant holder has no intellectual input or rights – this should only be done at a suitable cost. Anyone doing this should bear in mind that providing a service that could be sourced from a commercial supplier may incur complaints of unfair competition and the infringement of state aid rules.

Please see answer to question 19 for information on access for industrial collaborators.

36. Are we permitted to request consumables costs?

Yes. However, this does not cover costs which should be covered by estates e.g. postage, photocopying, toner, discs non-specialist books.

37. Are we permitted to request costs to cover service contracts / maintenance of equipment?

Yes. If these are purchased as part of a package with a piece of capital equipment they should be listed as capital costs. If they are to be purchased separately then they should be listed as 'other costs'.

38. Are we permitted to request costs to cover public engagement and outreach activities including training?

Yes, providing these activities are project-specific and the resources requested are justified. General activities that are arranged at the level of the department, school or university (for instance, industry open days) would not be eligible.

39. Can we request costs for a launch event?

This is not something we normally fund, but if it is fully justified then yes.

40. Can we request costs for travel e.g. to the annual meeting mentioned in the call text?

Yes, costs for travel are eligible but must be for meetings within the lifetime of the Centre and be fully justified.

41. Are studentships an eligible cost?

No, postgraduate studentships will not be an eligible cost for the Centres and should not be included as part of the application. Host Research Organisations with existing Research Council-funded doctoral students should consider how best to integrate relevant studentships into the work of the Centre, reflecting the existing demands of Doctoral Training Partnerships/Centres for Doctoral Training on students' training.

42. Should partners who do not benefit financially be listed in the application?

Yes, these details should be included either as project partners or collaborators, depending on the nature of the interaction. Guidance is provided in sections 2.37-2.47 of the BBSRC Grants Guide.

43. Can we include request for 'pump priming' funds?

Yes.

44. Can we request refurbishment costs?

Where refurbishment adds life to a building / increases the value generally or is required in order to enable an aspect of the scientific research, then yes.

45. Can we change the costs listed in the EoI for the full proposals?

Yes, the EoI costs were indicative and some applicants may want and / or need to revise these for the full proposals.

46. The application is to be made on one form; for joint applications how should we address different FEC funding model parameters?

Costs should be calculated for each institution and added together, the total should be listed on the form. A breakdown of the calculation should be included in the justification of resources section.

QUESTIONS ON THE APPLICATION AND ASSESSMENT PROCESS

47. Am I still able to apply to this call if I didn't submit an EoI?

Yes - the EoI stage was not mandatory. The EoI gave applicants an early opportunity to consider a proposal, and allowed BBSRC and EPSRC to obtain an early stage indication of:

- community interest and demands on funding;
- scope and spread of the proposed bids;
- potential overlaps with one another, or with previous awards;
- issues relating to remit and eligibility.

48. How will the proposals be assessed, and what will the assessment criteria be?

Proposals will be assessed in a similar manner to responsive mode, with full external peer review followed by a specially convened expert panel that will assess the proposals using the scope and aims, taking into account the reviewers' comments and the applicants' response.

The Panel will also consider:

- the excellence of the scientific proposal
- the strategic importance of the Centre to BBSRC, EPSRC and the applicants' institutions
- appropriateness of the proposed pathways to economic and social impact
- timeliness and promise
- value for money
- the training and career development potential offered by the Centre
- the long-term sustainability of the Centre

The Panel will generate a rank-ordered list to identify the Centres that are recommended for funding.

49. Should we include letters of support from collaborators (UK and / or International)?

Letters of support **must** be included to confirm an active collaboration or contribution to a Centre in terms of resources or expertise, and may be included where a statement from a third party is necessary to enable the informed assessment of a proposal. Applicants are asked to note that members of an institution which has provided a letter of support will not in general be used as assessors for that proposal. **Only directly relevant letters of support should be submitted.**

Letters of support must be on headed paper, dated within six months of the date of submission of the proposal and have the signature of the named contact in the partnering / collaborating organisation. The letter should confirm the extent of the contribution and commitment to the proposed project.

50. Our international collaborators are operating on a different time-scale to the Centres and are unable to commit support for the full life time of the proposal, should we still include them?

As long as the collaboration is complementary to the Centre proposal and is not dependent on the proposal being funded, then yes.

The ERASynBio 1st Joint Call may be an opportunity to continue funding international collaborations (Dr Andy Boyce, andy.boyce@bbsrc.ac.uk, is the contact for this call).

51. Can unsuccessful proposals be revised and re-submitted to the second phase?

Revised proposals may be submitted to the second phase, subject to prior approval from the SBRC Panel secretariat. We would expect the proposals to be revised in light of feedback from the assessment of the first phase and would not expect to see very similar proposals resubmitted. It is possible that the second phase may be more

targeted, depending on the outcome of the first phase. Further information about re-submitting proposals will be provided to unsuccessful applicants.

External contacts

Luke Davis, EPSRC
luke.davis@epsrc.ac.uk
tel: 01793 444478

Kedar Pandya, EPSRC
kedar.pandya@epsrc.ac.uk
tel: 01793 444317

Contacts

Ceri Lyn-Adams
ceri.lyn-adams@bbsrc.ac.uk
tel: 01793 413206

Rowan McKibbin
rowan.mckibbin@bbsrc.ac.uk
tel: 01793 413301