

Research Ireland Centres Programme

Full Proposal Guidance for Applicants¹

October 2024

¹ Should circumstances arise, the funder reserves the right to modify the review process.

For more information please consult the call webpage:

<https://www.sfi.ie/funding/funding-calls/sfi-research-centres/>

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of this document, it is provided for information purposes only and as a guide to expected developments. It is not intended, and should not be relied upon, as any form of warranty, representation, undertaking, contractual, or other commitment binding in law upon the funder, the Government of Ireland, or any of their respective servants or agents. The Grant General Terms and Conditions shall govern the administration of grants and awards to the exclusion of this and any other oral, written, or recorded statement.

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1. Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland

Please note that as of 1st August 2024 Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland has been established by the Research and Innovation Act 2024. Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland is the national competitive research and innovation funding agency, established through the amalgamation of the activities and functions of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Irish Research Council. During this period of change please note that where documentation and/or policies reference SFI this is Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland.

2. Full Proposal Timeline

Key Dates:

Full Proposal available to invited Applicants on SESAME:	9 th October 2024
Full Proposal webinar:	21 st October 2024 ²
Deadline for submission of Full Proposal:	26 th February 2025, 13:00
Reviewer comments sent to Lead Applicant:	4 th June 2025
Deadline for Applicant Response:	18 th June 2025, 13:00
Interview Panel Review:	Mid-September 2025
Funding Decision:	Expected December 2025

While we will make every attempt to adhere to the timetable and deadlines outlined above, Research Ireland retains the right to modify the timetable, if necessary, for operational reasons. In such an eventuality, Research Ireland will advise all applicant teams as soon as possible. Note that all times referred to are Dublin, Ireland local time.

3. Full Proposal Submission – Points for the Attention of Applicants

Proposal Title – Applicants should use the same proposal title as the Pre-Proposal stage, however any instance of ‘Science Foundation Ireland’ or ‘SFI’ must be changed to ‘Research Ireland’. Please do not make any other change to the proposal title at this time, unless instructed otherwise. Please note that any name should be considered to be interim, and final Centre branding is to be discussed and agreed with the funder prior to grant start date.

Total Funding Request Amount (in €) – Applicants may modify their budget between Pre- and Full Proposal stages. However, this must result in the same or lower total budget than the Pre-Proposal submission, and Applicants must not enter a higher budget request than the Pre-Proposal submission.

Full Proposal Programme Document

The Full Proposal Programme Document template has been updated to include text as above for the Proposal Title and a table for Centre Principal Investigators (PIs). As mentioned in the Full Proposal Programme Document, this table does not count towards page count for this section. Please use the table as presented in the template, without adding further columns or other information to it. Please make sure to use the updated Full Proposal Programme Document template (Word) on the call webpage.

Full Proposal Budget Excel

The Full Proposal Budget Excel template has been updated to include the SME incentive (i.e. industry cash from SMEs counts as double for the cost share model, up to the limit of the 10% industry cash target). This has changed the tab ‘Proposed Cost Share’ where industry cash must now be split into ‘Cash (from SMEs)’

² Further details on the webinar will be shared closer to the webinar date.

and 'Cash (from non-SMEs)'. This change is carried over to the 'Centre Summary Tab', which populates automatically. Budgets should be completed using the most up-to-date salary scales³. Please make sure to use the updated Full Proposal Budget excel available on the call webpage.

All Applicants must ensure that they are using the most up-to-date template.

Letters of Support

Research Ireland would like to take the opportunity to draw all Lead Applicants' attention to the Detailed guidance on the Letters of Support in the Guidance for Applicants Document, in Section 7.13 *Letters of Support*. This information is important to establish eligibility, and letters that do not meet requirements will not be eligible for inclusion in the Full Proposal evaluation. In the case of each type of letter of support, we would like to highlight a key consideration for all Applicants to take note of:

- *A letter of support from each industry partner outlining their intention to participate in the proposed Research Centre.*

Please note the further specifics included in the Guidance for Applicants Document, including the requirement for these letters at Full Proposal stage to include specific commitments of cost share.

- *A letter of support from the Research Body of the Lead Applicant and each Co-Applicant.*

Please note the further specifics included in the Guidance for Applicants Document. Applicants should ensure that all Lead and Co-Applicants are mentioned in the institutional letters of support. A separate letter is not required for each individual, please provide a single letter per relevant institution that includes all relevant Applicants from that institution. Letters of support are not required at this stage for Centre PIs.

- *Where applicable, a letter of support from each organisation committing other non-exchequer contributions (e.g., philanthropic sources, charitable donations) towards the Research Centre should be provided.*

Please note that to be included in this category, a letter must include a clear commitment of cost share to the proposed Centre.

Where Applicants wish to include mention of other partnerships, collaborations, etc., that do not meet the requirements for a Letter of Support as outlined above, they can mention these in relevant sections of the programme document such as: Research Programme, Education and Public Engagement, Impact, or Cost Share and Business Plan.

Changes between Pre- and Full Proposal

It is important that there is consistency between the proposal that was reviewed at Pre-Proposal stage, and that reviewed at Full Proposal stage. However, there may be a need for changes in light of comments included in the Panel Report from the Pre-Proposal Panel. Applicants should note the below extract from Section 7.2 of the Guidance for Applicants Document:

Note: *SFI recognises that in exceptional circumstances it may be necessary for Applicant Teams to modify their Lead Applicant/Co-Applicants/Centre PIs between the Pre-Proposal and Full Proposal, and hence it is not required that an identical set of Lead Applicant/Co-Applicants/Centre PIs be identified on the Full Proposal as were identified on the Pre-Proposal. Applicant Teams intending to change their set of Lead Applicant/Co-Applicants/Centre PIs **must contact SFI in advance of submission of the Full Proposal** and have received approval in writing from SFI for such a change.*

³ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/budget-finance-related-policies/>

This extract notes that changes to Lead Applicant/Co-Applicants/Centre PIs should be made in exceptional circumstances, and it would be expected that such changes would primarily arise as the result of reviewer comments included in the Panel Report from the Pre-Proposal Panel. Another example could be the replacement of an individual who is no longer available to participate.

Any requests for changes to Lead Applicant/Co-Applicants/Centre PIs must be notified to Research Ireland by email to centres@researchireland.ie as early as possible and in advance of the Full Proposal submission deadline.

4. Review Process

The submission of an application to the call shall be construed as consent by the Applicants to participate in the peer review process. Applications will be evaluated by rigorous international peer review on the basis of the review criteria outlined in Section 6. Reviewers engaged by the funder must agree to certify to a declaration of confidentiality (in a Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Statement) prior to conducting a review. At the Full Proposal submission stage, the Applicant Team may specify up to three individuals who should not act as postal reviewers for their proposal due to the competitive and confidential nature of the research programme. The application will not be sent to any of these selected individuals. Otherwise, the selection of reviewers is at the sole and exclusive discretion of the funder. The funder shall not be liable for the release of information concerning proposals to third parties by those individuals involved in the review procedure. Please note, the funder reserves the right to modify the review procedure. Applicants will be notified of any relevant modification. The final funding decisions are at the sole and exclusive discretion of the funder.

Each eligible Full Proposal to the Research Ireland Centres Programme call will be evaluated through the following process:

- **Postal Review:** Applications submitted by the deadline will be assessed to ensure that they comply with the eligibility requirements of the call. Eligible proposals will be sent for subject expert peer review. Each Full Proposal will be reviewed by five to seven international subject expert postal reviewers with expertise relevant to the proposal under review. These reviewers will each provide written comments and scores against the review criteria. The identity of international experts who conduct reviews shall remain confidential and will not be disclosed to the Applicants.
- **Applicant Response:** Following submission of all postal reviews for a proposal, the postal reviewers' comments will be collated, anonymised and provided to the Lead Applicant, who is given the opportunity to provide a written response to the comments. The Lead Applicant is given a two week period in which to respond. The submission of the applicant response will take place via SESAME. This response shall not exceed 1600 words (inclusive of references). In addition, an applicant response may include an appendix of no more than one A4 page (one side) for supporting information. This information may include, for example, technical diagrams, graphics or graphs, or other information pertinent to, or in support of, the response from the applicant. The applicant response submitted by the Lead Applicant, along with the compiled anonymous comments, will be made available to the postal reviewers, who will have the opportunity to adjust their comments and scores based on the applicant response in a post-applicant response review. In cases where the applicant response is not submitted before the deadline, or the Lead Applicant chooses not to submit an applicant response, postal reviewers will be informed that no applicant response was received and that reviewer comments and scores will remain unchanged.
- **Pre-Interview Evaluation:** Based on the evaluations submitted by the postal reviewers, the funder will select a maximum of ten proposals that have demonstrated the highest level of excellence, based

on the review criteria, to progress to the Full Proposal Interview stage. The funder, where appropriate, reserves the right to determine that the scores for the review criteria, from the post-applicant response reviews, are below the threshold for funding and that the application will not proceed to the Full Proposal Interview stage. This threshold is defined as an overall weighted average score across all postal reviews of equal to or greater than 4.0. In addition, the average score for each individual review criterion must be equal to or greater than 3.5. For those applications which have the same overall weighted average score, SFI may use tiebreakers to separate applications in order to ensure that only those proposals of the highest level of excellence proceed to Full Proposal Interview stage. If required, ties will be broken first by using the average postal score for the Research Programme review criterion. If further ties remain, the average postal score for Applicant Team will be used, followed in turn if required by Impact, Execution and Delivery, then EPE, in that order, as required. Those applicants who are not invited to the Full Proposal Interview stage will be declined. Anonymised reviewer comments (post-applicant response) will be made available to all applicants in advance of the Full Proposal Interview stage.

- **Full Proposal Interview:** The Full Proposal Panel will convene in-person at a meeting to be held in Research Ireland offices or another location in Dublin. The Panel will comprise external independent high-level experts, such as Vice Presidents of Research from universities, international research leaders, senior representatives from private and social enterprise, entrepreneurs, and experts in public engagement. Panel members will be briefed on the programme prior to the Panel meeting and will be provided with all documentation relating to each application, including the proposal, budget, postal reviews and applicant response. Applicants invited to Full Proposal Interview stage will receive additional information in advance of the interview about the timings and format, as well as the profiles of the Panel members. Each Applicant Team invited to interview will present an overview of their proposal, and the vision and business case for the Research Centre. Following the presentation there will be a question and answer (Q&A) session. As part of the presentation and subsequent Q&A session applicants may address aspects of the reviewer comments. Panel members will be tasked with providing a ranked list of fundable proposals. For those applications which have the same overall weighted average score, ties will be broken using the score for the Impact review criterion. Further tiebreakers will be considered if required. A report will be written on each proposal, capturing the Panel's evaluation of that proposal, along with any recommendations made by the Panel. The Panel may also provide to Research Ireland perspectives on, for example, justification of budget requests, the strength of institutional leadership, coordination and support, efficiencies that may be gained in relation to Operations Teams, or other inputs that the Panel considers relevant to the final decision as to which proposals are to be funded. Factors such as strategic input from other national funders and government departments may also be considered by Research Ireland. Furthermore, Research Ireland have the objective of building a collaborative, dynamic, cohesive and streamlined ecosystem of Research Centres, in areas of national importance; Applicants should be mindful of the expectation that their proposal be distinct, and absent of significant overlaps with other proposals or funded entities. The final funding decisions are at the sole and exclusive discretion of the Board of the funder. Conditions for funding may be stipulated, which could include funding a reduced budget, or modification of a proposal.
- **Notification:** It is anticipated that the Applicants will be informed of the outcome of the review process in December 2025. Successful Applicants may be required to submit revised documentation (workplan and budget) ahead of issue of Letter of Offer.
- **Award start date:** Awards are expected to begin on 1st July 2026.

5. Review Criteria

Please note, the review criteria remain unchanged from the Pre-Proposal stage, but are provided here for information.

Applicant Team

- The quality, significance, and relevance of the expertise, experience and key achievements of the Director(s) and Co-Applicants, including their track record in research in the relevant area, and the leadership and management of large-scale initiatives, commensurate with their career stage and research discipline, taking any periods of leave into account.
- The relevant expertise, experience and standing of the wider Research Centre team including Centre Principal Investigators and the potential for internationally renowned research and education.
- The competitiveness, strengths and cohesiveness of the team, including likely synergy in delivering interdisciplinary research excellence and innovation and the added value of the team in a national research centre.
- The strength and appropriateness of the Research Centre EDI Action Plan.
- How the Applicant Team has addressed each of the following areas, as outlined in their Narrative CVs⁴ (commensurate with their career stage and research discipline, taking any periods of leave into account):
 - Generation of Knowledge,
 - Development of Individuals and Collaborations,
 - Supporting Broader Society and the Economy, and,
 - Supporting the Research Community.

Score from 1-5, with half score possible; weighting of **25%**

- 1 – Very weak Applicant Team
- 2 – Weak Applicant Team
- 3 – Moderate Applicant Team
- 4 – Strong Applicant Team
- 5 – Outstanding Applicant Team

Research Programme

- The quality, significance, and relevance of the research programme, including the originality, novelty and timeliness of the research relative to the current state-of-the art in the field, and the potential to advance our knowledge and understanding in the relevant area.
- The potential practical value and applications of the proposed research to enable innovations in the field and the appropriate inclusion of interdisciplinary driven research approaches and expertise.
- The suitability of the research programme as a national research centre.
- The quality and appropriateness of the experimental design, methods, 'Sex and Gender Dimension in Research Statement', and Data Management Plan (Full Proposal stage).

Score from 1-5, with half score possible; weighting of **25%**

- 1 – Very weak research programme
- 2 – Weak research programme
- 3 – Moderate research programme
- 4 – Strong research programme
- 5 – Outstanding research programme

⁴ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/narrative-cv-dora/>

Education and Public Engagement

- Quality, significance, and relevance of the vision and plan for Education and Public Engagement (EPE) including clarity of approach and plan for engaging the non-academic public with the work of the Research Centre.
- Evidence of how the Applicant Team will successfully embed, support and enable the EPE approach and plan to be a core part of the research programme and Centre culture.
- Clarity of the objectives and measures of success of the EPE plan of the Research Centre.
- Appropriateness of target audiences, participants and stakeholders and approaches for engaging and involving them in the research programme of the Centre. Appropriateness of the expertise and resources requested.

Score from 1-5, with half score possible; weighting of **10%**

- 1 – Very weak EPE plan
- 2 – Weak EPE plan
- 3 – Moderate EPE plan
- 4 – Strong EPE plan
- 5 – Outstanding EPE plan

Impact

- Quality and significance of the potential economic, societal and environmental impact of the Research Centre.
- The potential impact of the Research Centre to a cohesive national research environment.
- The potential impact of the technologies developed and the contribution to enterprise competitiveness of the Research Centre.
- The appropriateness of the impact objectives and measures of success for the Research Centre, and how the EPE programme will contribute to the achievement of impact.

Score from 1-5, with half score possible; weighting of **20%**

- 1 – Very weak impact potential
- 2 – Weak impact potential
- 3 – Moderate impact potential
- 4 – Strong impact potential
- 5 – Outstanding impact potential

Execution and Delivery

- Quality of plans for execution and delivery of the Research Centre including the feasibility of achieving the overall vision and impact objectives in the time frame and the likelihood of meeting the cost-share commitments.
- The appropriateness of the management structure proposed including clarity of the roles and responsibilities and decision-making processes, and the provision and support of a robust and cohesive system for inter-institutional co-operation and effective management of the Centre.
- Evidence from the Research Bodies' letters of support of a shared responsibility to ensure the success of the Centre and of strong alignment with institutional strategies. The appropriate involvement of the Applicant Team in institutional decision-making processes that will impact the Centre.
- The appropriateness of recruitment and succession plans.
- The quality and appropriateness of the facilities and infrastructure, student and staff conditions and well-being support, training and career development opportunities.
- The range and level of industry support and commitment to the Research Centre and overall strategic value for money.
- Evidence of steps to reduce the climate and environmental footprint of research.
- Evidence of a significant inter-institutional commitment to the Research Centre EDI Action Plan and alignment with Research Bodies' EDI commitments and initiatives.

Score from 1-5, with half score possible; weighting of **20%**

1 – Very weak execution and delivery potential

2 – Weak execution and delivery potential

3 – Moderate execution and delivery potential

4 – Strong execution and delivery potential

5 – Outstanding execution and delivery potential