



# SCIENCE FOUNDATION IRELAND

## SFI Research Centres Programme 2023

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### Frequently Asked Questions

Last Updated 5<sup>th</sup> March 2024

Queries should be directed to: [centres@sfi.ie](mailto:centres@sfi.ie)

#### Terms of Reference

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## **1 Applicant Team and Management**

### **1.1 Is there a minimum % time commitment specified for the Lead Applicant?**

Yes, the Lead Applicant minimum % time commitment is 40%.

### **1.2 Is there a minimum % time commitment specified for the Co-Applicants?**

No, there is no minimum % time commitment specified for the Co-Applicants. However, in all cases the Co-Applicant must have the available time to dedicate to the submission(s) that they are a part of, and the roles set out therein.

### **1.3 Is there guidance on the maximum number of Centre PIs per Centre?**

No, this is for the Applicant Team to determine. Consideration should be given to the expertise required to deliver on the Centre's vision, and forming a team that is well managed, coordinated and streamlined. In addition, Applicants should bear in mind the requirement for all PIs to hold at least €100,000 of direct SFI funding from the Centre award.

### **1.4 Can there be co-leads for the themes? Should they be included/named in the Applicant Team?**

Not for the purpose of the proposal. One Co-Applicant will be designated as Research Theme Lead for each research theme. Funded Centres may put in place further management and leadership structures and processes to facilitate the successful operation of the theme.

### **1.5 Can a proposal have Co-Applicants who are not Research Theme Leads?**

The Co-Applicants should all have a specific role in the Centre, namely Director(s) and Theme Leads (one of whom will be the Deputy Director).

### **1.6 Can a Centre have more than one Deputy Director?**

No, only one Deputy Director is permitted.

### **1.7 Can Centre Directors also act as Theme Leads?**

No. A Centre Director will have a key research role on one or more of the research themes of the Centre. However, as the Director has the overarching responsibility for leadership of the Centre, they should not also be named as a Theme Lead on the proposal. Funded Centres may put in place further management and leadership structures and processes to facilitate the successful operation of the theme, and this could include a role for the Director.

### **1.8 Can researchers from Northern Ireland apply as Co-Applicants or Centre PIs?**

No. One of the programme objectives is for Centres to have a strong network beyond the Republic of Ireland, however only individuals from the [eligible Research Bodies](#) listed on the SFI website may be added as members of the Centre team.

### **1.9 Can changes be made to the applicant team between the EoI, Pre-Proposal and Full Proposal stages?**

SFI recognises that in exceptional circumstances it may be necessary for Applicant Teams to modify their Lead Applicant/Co-Applicants/Centre PIs between the EoI and Pre-Proposal, or 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 Pre-Proposal as were identified on the EoI. Applicant Teams intending to change their Lead Applicant/Co-Applicants/Centre PIs must contact SFI in advance of submission of the Pre/Full Proposal and have received approval in writing from SFI.

### **1.10 Will existing SFI Centres be considered under the same stream as new applications?**

The 2023 Centres call is open to all, and there is one single application and review process, and likewise eligibility and review criteria are equal for all Applicant Teams. All proposals are asked for any significant collaborations, experience leading and managing large-scale initiatives and track record of interdisciplinary research excellence and innovation.

## **2 Centre Structure**

### **2.1 Do Centres need to be based in one HEI or can they be co-hosted?**

All Centre proposals must include more than one Research Body, of which at least one must be a Technological University or Institute of Technology. Across this consortium of Research Bodies, there are Partners and Coordinating Partners.

A Partner Research Body is a Research Body that has at least one PI as an active team member in the Centre at that time. All Partner Research Bodies will work together to drive and support the success of the Centre. All Partner Research Bodies take responsibility for the effective running and delivery of the Centre's goals.

A Coordinating Partner Research Body is a Research Body that takes a leading role in the consortium of Research Bodies that work together to support the success of the SFI Research Centre. The Research Body of the Lead Applicant must be a Coordinating Partner, but there can be any number of Coordinating Partners.

**2.2 Will there be CRTs outside the Centres or will cohort based PhD training only be based in Centres?**

The cohort-based approach to PhD training in the 2023 Centres call is a response to significant stakeholder feedback and learnings by SFI. The adoption of cohort-based training in the SFI Research Centres programme is not directly related to the CRT programme, and the future course of this programme is currently under discussion within SFI.

**2.3 Should the doctoral training element be a stand-alone activity within the Centre or should it be integrated into the platform?**

The cohort-based PhD training programme of the Centre should be included as part of platform research, as mentioned in section 4.4.2 of the call document. PhD training should be coherent and well designed, and further detail for this is outlined in section 4.4.6 of the call document.

**2.4 Is there guidance on the budget cap/expected scale of each proposed Centre?**

There is no minimum/maximum budget for application to the 2023 Centres programme call. SFI expects to fund a range of Centre sizes. Proposal scale should be optimised to the research capacity in the domain proposed, in line with excellence of the proposal, streamlined and deliver value for money, and coherent across the proposed Centre.

**2.5 How many Research Centres are expected to be funded from this Call?**

There is no stated target number of Centres that are expected to be funded from this call. The final number will depend on the excellence of proposals received, the need for a cohesive ecosystem, and other factors such as budget.

**2.6 Regarding operations structure, what type of roles do you envisage being shared across Centres or with Research Bodies?**

For the purposes of this call we ask applicants to consider shared services between Centres, or between Centres and Research Body administrative and support teams, where appropriate. This is part of the objective of having a collaborative, dynamic, cohesive and streamlined ecosystem of Research Centres.

SFI may seek to look at the collective Operations Teams across all funded Centres at a later date, and any such consideration of this would be undertaken in close communication with Research Bodies.

### **3 Eligibility**

**3.1 In the case of a proposed Centre that will be led by two Co-Directors, do both Directors need to meet the eligibility criteria of the Lead Applicant?**

Yes.

### **4 Research Programme**

**4.1 Are proposals that address more than one of the thematic areas encouraged? Or is there a preference for proposals with a tight focus on one theme?**

This is for applicants to determine, in line with the excellence of their team and research programme, their vision and strategy, and in full consideration of the programme objectives and review criteria.

**4.2 Does the proposed Centre need to cover the entirety of a theme?**

No, a proposed Centre is not expected to work across the entirety of the theme they are aligned to, and a Centre can be focused on a specific sub-topic within that theme. A proposed Centre can also work across multiple themes, but we ask for the applicants to determine a primary theme alignment, and if they wish a secondary them alignment.

**4.3 What KPIs will the awarded Centres have?**

KPIs will be decided before the launch of the Centres, and are not part of the application process.

### **5 Education and Public Engagement**

**5.1 What are some examples of Education and Public Engagement costs that are outside the cost share model?**

Non-staff EPE costs are outside the cost share model. This includes materials and travel costs, and there is some further information on potential EPE budget costs in section 5.5 of the call document, and also in the [EPE Framework and Impact document](#).

**5.2 What percentage of the total SFI budget should be allocated to education and public engagement?**

As a guideline, at least 5% of the SFI budget should be allocated to the totality of the EPE programme in the Centre.

**5.3 If a Centre was to fund a PhD in the area of EPE, would the budget for this sit within the Operations EPE budget or the Platform Research budget?**

Costs associated with specific engaged research work, including for researchers working in this area, should be included in the platform research budget. Personnel required to run the Centre's EPE programme at an operational level, such as dedicated management for EPE, should be included in the operations budget.

## **6 Research Centre Budget and SFI Funding**

**6.1 Can the budget request vary between the EoI and Pre-Proposal application stages?**

The EoI asks for approximate SFI funding request. The SFI funding request is expected to be broadly consistent and similar between EoI and Pre-Proposal. The Lead Applicant should email [centres@sfi.ie](mailto:centres@sfi.ie) to advise of a significant change.

**6.2 At the application stage, it is not always possible to know recruit a new individual or someone already existing in the public-sector system. How is one then to know which scale to utilise?**

SFI recognises that the identity of team members may not be known at the time of grant preparation. In such cases grant applicants should request budget contributions for team members using the 'Existing Public Servant' scale. If a team role is ultimately filled by a 'new entrant' SFI will decide whether funds liberated by such an occurrence shall be returned to SFI or can be used productively elsewhere within the grant. Further details about SFI's Grant Application Budget Policy can be found [here](#).

**6.3 What size of a Centre Strategic Fund is acceptable relative to the overall SFI request?**

This is for Applicants to determine, in line with their strategy and the vision for the Centre proposal. Requests for a Centre Strategic Fund should be included within the budget, and proposed uses for the Fund should well justified.

**6.4 Where a PI is required to hold €100k of SFI funding is it envisaged that this would be platform funding or targeted project funding?**

Each PI must hold at least €100,000 of SFI direct funds from the Centre award. This includes PIs added after the start of the Centre award. These funds can be for any Centre-aligned activities, including platform or targeted project funding.

**6.5 Is there further guidance on the equipment allowed within the programme? i.e. % of overall SFI investment?**

The total budget request for equipment is for Applicants to determine, in line with their strategy and the vision for the Centre proposal. Equipment up to a maximum of 5% of the total SFI direct costs will be outside of the cost share model, but less than or greater than 5% of the total SFI direct costs can be requested for equipment costs.

## **7 Cost-Share**

**7.1 Is it a requirement that there must be SME involvement in the Centre?**

Although not mandating SME involvement, SFI welcomes and encourages the Research Centres to actively engage with SMEs. Industry cash cost share that is received from SMEs will also reduce the industry cash cost share target by an equal amount to the cost share received. The effect of this will be to double the effective value of SME cost share to the industry cash portion of the cost share model. It is at the discretion of the Applicant Team to secure engagement from industry partners, large or small, which are best aligned with the research agenda and goals of the Centre.

**7.2 For SME engagement, does this include international SMEs or only those based in Ireland?**

Any.

**7.3 How is funding from charities or philanthropy counted?**

Charity and philanthropic funding for Centre activities would fall under non-exchequer non-commercial cost share.

**7.4 What funding sources are included in the Exchequer funding category?**

Details of the categories of eligible exchequer funding as cost share are included in section 5.6.3 of the call document. For more specific questions please contact [centres@sfi.ie](mailto:centres@sfi.ie).

**7.5 How should industry commitments be demonstrated at each proposal stage?**

No cost share information, including commitments, are requested at Expression of Interest stage.

At Pre-Proposal stage, a letter of support from each industry partner may be included outlining their intention to participate in the proposed Research Centre. Please see section 6.8 of the Guidance for Applicants. This letter can, but does not need to, include commitments to contribute to the proposed Centre's cost share.



At Full Proposal stage, a letter of support from each industry partner may be included outlining their intention to participate in the proposed Research Centre. Please see section 7.13 of the Guidance for Applicants. Among other information provided, this section includes the following:

*“The letter of support should describe a collaborative research project in an area of mutual research interest, where the industry partner would be interested to work with the Applicant Team if funded and the level of cost-share commitment from the industry partner, both in terms of cash and in-kind contributions and the time period for which the contribution is being made. The letter of support should cover at a minimum the first two years of the grant and the plans, interests and other potential collaborative research projects during the course of the grant from each industry partner. Applicants should ensure that a completed company contribution table (Industry Partner Letter of Support) is included within each letter.”*

Please note that SFI Research Centres are dynamic and flexible, and while commitments at the outset of the funded Centre are an important foundation, applicants are not expected to have secured commitments for the totality of their cost share targets at the proposal stage.

## **8 Application Submission & Review Process**

### **8.1 How is the Expression of Interest Submitted?**

The Expression of Interest must be submitted via email to [centres@sfi.ie](mailto:centres@sfi.ie) no later than November 1<sup>st</sup> 2023, 13.00h Dublin Local Time.

### **8.2 Under which SESAME profile should the Pre-Proposal and Full Proposal be submitted?**

Only the Lead Applicant will be able to submit the Pre-Proposal and Full Proposal on SESAME.

### **8.3 Can two Co-Applicants input their information into SESAME at the same time or will one’s information override the other?**

SESAME does not permit two individuals to concurrently modify an application. The Lead Applicant must log out of the application to allow a Co-Applicant to make modifications, and vice versa. It is the responsibility of the Lead Applicant to ensure that this activity is coordinated well in advance of the submission deadline.

### **8.4 How will Centre PIs be identified in SESAME, i.e. differentiated from Lead Applicant and Co-Applicants?**

As part of the SESAME submission form the Lead Applicant and Co-Applicants will need to complete specific fields on SESAME as outlined in the Guidance for Applicants document. Centre PIs will be

listed in the Programme Document upload in the Applicant Team section. Please see the Templates Section of the Guidance for Applicants document.

**8.5 Do the various fields need to be completed chronologically, or can we skip to later sections and come back to an earlier section later?**

Once the Proposal Title and Duration of Grant fields are entered and saved the other fields in SESAME can be completed in any order. Please ensure to click 'Save Draft' after editing the application to ensure that no changes are lost. You cannot submit the application until all mandatory fields have been completed and mandatory files have been uploaded. Please see the Submission Checklist in the Guidance for Applicants document.

**8.6 Can we use hyperlinks in the Pre-Proposal or Full Proposal documents?**

Hyperlinks and URLs are only allowed when specifically noted in call documents or SESAME guidance/instructions. The use of hyperlinks is typically limited to citing information already in the public domain which is **non-critical to the evaluation of the proposal**. Hyperlinks and URLs may not be used to provide additional information, which would be necessary for application review, and as a means of circumventing page limits. Reviewers are not obligated to view linked sites and are cautioned that they should not directly access a website (unless the link to the site was specifically requested in application instructions). When allowed, you must reference the actual URL text so it appears on the page, for example in brackets or in a footnote, rather than hiding the URL behind a specific word or phrase.

**8.7 Will there be an applicant response stage?**

The Full Proposal Interview will be the opportunity to respond to subject expert peer review and to address any questions from the Full Proposal review panel.

**8.8 Does the ORCID profile have to be fully up to date for each applicant?**

SFI strongly encourages you to ensure that the ORCID profile is up to date for each Lead-Applicant and Co-Applicant such that the information in the ORCID profile represents all their publication outputs to date.

**8.9 Can changes be made between EoI and Pre-Proposal?**

The Expression of Interest (EoI) is very important for planning purposes for SFI. Applicant Teams intending to change their Lead Applicant/Co-Applicants/Centre PIs must contact SFI in advance of

submission of the Pre-Proposal and have received approval in writing from SFI for such a change. SFI recognises that certain changes in other areas may occur as the Pre-Proposal is developed, and the Foundation expects that Applicants will inform the Foundation of any significant changes between EoI and Pre-Proposal. Please see here a breakdown by section of potential changes and whether notification should be considered:

- Title – Can change between EoI and Pre-Proposal. The Lead Applicant should email [centres@sfi.ie](mailto:centres@sfi.ie) to advise of a change in writing between the EoI and Pre-Proposal.
- Thematic area – Can't change between EoI and Pre-Proposal.
- Does it relate to current or previous SFI grants – Should be consistent between EoI and Pre-Proposal. Any extra information or changes between EoI and Pre-Proposal please contact [centres@sfi.ie](mailto:centres@sfi.ie).
- Director/Deputy/Theme Leads/Centre PIs – Can only change with approval in writing from SFI. Please see the guidance for applicants document, page 10.
- Funding request – Can change between EoI and Pre-Proposal. The EoI asks for approximate SFI funding request. However, the SFI funding request is expected to be consistent and similar between EoI and Pre-Proposal. The Lead Applicant should email [centres@sfi.ie](mailto:centres@sfi.ie) to advise of a significant change between the EoI and Pre-Proposal.
- Abstract – We would expect the proposed Centre research programme and vision to be broadly consistent between EoI and Pre-Proposal.

We would recommend that if in doubt concerning any potential change that Applicants should inform SFI of the expected change.

**8.10 Will SFI Research Centre applicants receive any reviewer comments from the Pre-Proposal stage evaluation?**

All applicants will receive feedback on their application from the Pre-Proposal Panel, whether they are invited to Full Proposal stage or not.

**8.11 Question: Could you please confirm that the review weightings for the Full Application stage are the same as for the Pre-Proposal?**

SFI currently plans to maintain review criteria and weighting across Pre- and Full Proposal stages.