



SCIENCE FOUNDATION IRELAND

SFI Research Centres Programme 2023

Call for Submission of Proposals

Version: 22nd September 2023

Terms of Reference

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Key Dates:

Call announcement	14 th September 2023
Webinar	26 th September 2023
Deadline for submission of Expression of Interest	1 st November 2023, 13:00
Deadline for submission of Pre-Proposal	13 th December 2023, 13:00
Deadline for submission of Full Proposal	25 th September 2024, 13:00
Panel Review	January 2025
Funding Decision	April 2025

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

1 Introduction

Science Foundation Ireland's Strategy 2025: *Shaping Our Future*¹ aims to position Ireland as a global innovation leader in scientific and engineering research for the advancement of Ireland's economy and society. SFI Research Centres play an important role in the Shaping Our Future strategy by driving excellent research, attracting top international talent, and delivering economic and societal impact. SFI Research Centres deliver on key objectives within *Impact 2030*², Ireland's national research and innovation strategy. They directly support the ambition of Impact 2030 that "*Research and innovation make a real and positive impact across society, the economy and the environment, both domestically and internationally*" and "*Enterprises, particularly SMEs, start, succeed and transform through innovation, knowledge exchange, research commercialisation and access to highly skilled people.*" Furthermore, the SFI Research Centres programme prioritises investment in research and innovation in areas of strategic importance to Ireland (Research Priority Areas 2018 to 2023³), enhancing Ireland's ability to respond to global opportunities and challenges. The National Development Plan 2018-2027⁴ (Project Ireland 2040), which is the overarching policy and planning framework for the social, economic and cultural development of Ireland from 2018 to 2040, commits to further development and scaling of the network of SFI Research Centres.

Since launching in 2012, the SFI Research Centres programme has transformed the research ecosystem in Ireland and enhanced Ireland's international reputation. Research Centres have delivered research excellence in areas of national priority and are developing a pipeline of talented researchers with critical, in demand skills. They have created an environment where multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary collaborations are now the norm, and where academia engages in deeply collaborative research partnerships with indigenous and multinational industries to deliver internationally-leading research, cutting edge technologies and advancements. A strong culture of Education and Public Engagement (EPE) has developed. SFI Research Centres have undertaken engagement with, and facilitated the participation of, a broad range of stakeholders including civil society and community groups with their research. This work has helped to stimulate public understanding, interest and involvement in research and STEM. A University of Limerick study⁵, led by Prof Helena Lenihan, analysed the value of the SFI Research Centres programme. Importantly, the study found that companies that collaborate with SFI Research Centres tend to increase their investment in research and development (R&D), redirecting their R&D spending towards more scientific types of research. The study found that the SFI Research Centres programme has led to greater potential for breakthrough ideas and disruptive innovations, boosting the Irish economy, making it both more competitive and resilient.

SFI has now developed an enhanced SFI Research Centres programme that builds upon the success of the current model, and further optimises the programme for the future. The development of this revised programme was informed by deep consultation with stakeholders including Government and the public sector, industry, and the higher education and research system. SFI's vision is the development of a dynamic, cohesive and streamlined ecosystem of SFI Research Centres that are international beacons of scientific excellence, bringing together a critical mass of outstanding researchers to collaborate at a scale that will yield national and international impact. In partnership with industry, government and civil society, Centres will deliver systemic impact, providing talent and innovative solutions to Ireland's economic, societal and environmental challenges. SFI Research

¹ [SFI Strategy 2025 Shaping Our Future](#)

² [Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy](#)

³ [Research Priority Areas 2018 to 2023](#)

⁴ [National Development Plan 2018-2027](#)

⁵ [Harnessing the science base: Results from a national programme using publicly-funded research centres to reshape firms' R&D](#)

Centres will also integrate deep and impactful public engagement into the fabric and culture of the Centre, which will bring significant value to the research, the researchers and all those working in the Centre, and deliver benefit for public good.

2 Programme Objectives

The primary objective of **the SFI Research Centres programme** is:

1. To deliver a programme of internationally-leading, excellent research, at both oriented basic and applied levels, led by a team of world-leading PIs and rising stars.

Additional specific objectives include:

2. To support collaboration between Higher Education Institutes across Ireland to build a truly collaborative, dynamic, cohesive and streamlined ecosystem of Research Centres, in areas of national importance.
3. To engage in deeply collaborative research partnerships with industry that will deliver cutting-edge technologies and advancements, increase private investment in research, and support the growth of small and medium enterprises.
4. To deliver a programme of deep, purposeful public engagement, to embed practices, including engaged research, in the fabric and culture of research teams, and to strengthen research itself through learnings from engagement activities.
5. To deliver systemic impact, providing innovative solutions to Ireland's economic, societal and environmental challenges, in partnership with industry, government and civil society.
6. To foster excellent, diverse and interdisciplinary research teams, with support, training and progression at all levels, to advance early-career researchers, and to develop the workforce of tomorrow.
7. To improve equality, diversity and inclusion in the leadership team and at all levels of the research team, recognising that diversity is integral to research excellence.
8. To take action to reduce the climate and environmental footprint of research.
9. To leverage significant investment in research from other funding sources, and grow Ireland's international presence and leadership in research networks.

3 Programme Remit

The Research Centre Programme will accept applications in the thematic areas defined below and must fit within SFI's legal authority⁶. The themes have been chosen in line with the National Research Priority Areas 2018 to 2023, and SFI's remit, and they are as follows:

1. Digital Technologies
2. Energy, Climate Action and Sustainability
3. Food
4. Life Sciences and Health
5. Manufacturing and Materials
6. Services and Business Processes (applications under this theme must have a strong STEM focus, aligned with SFI remit)

Applicant Teams must be able to demonstrate a primary alignment of the proposed Research Centre to one of the themes, clearly articulating how their research and its outputs will address challenges

⁶ [SFI Legal remit](#)

and opportunities in that domain. Secondary alignment with one further theme can also be indicated in the proposal.

Interdisciplinary research programmes are strongly encouraged, as are programmes and research teams that include significant components and strong leadership roles for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) research and researchers.

4 Research Centre Structure

4.1 The Applicant Team and Research Bodies

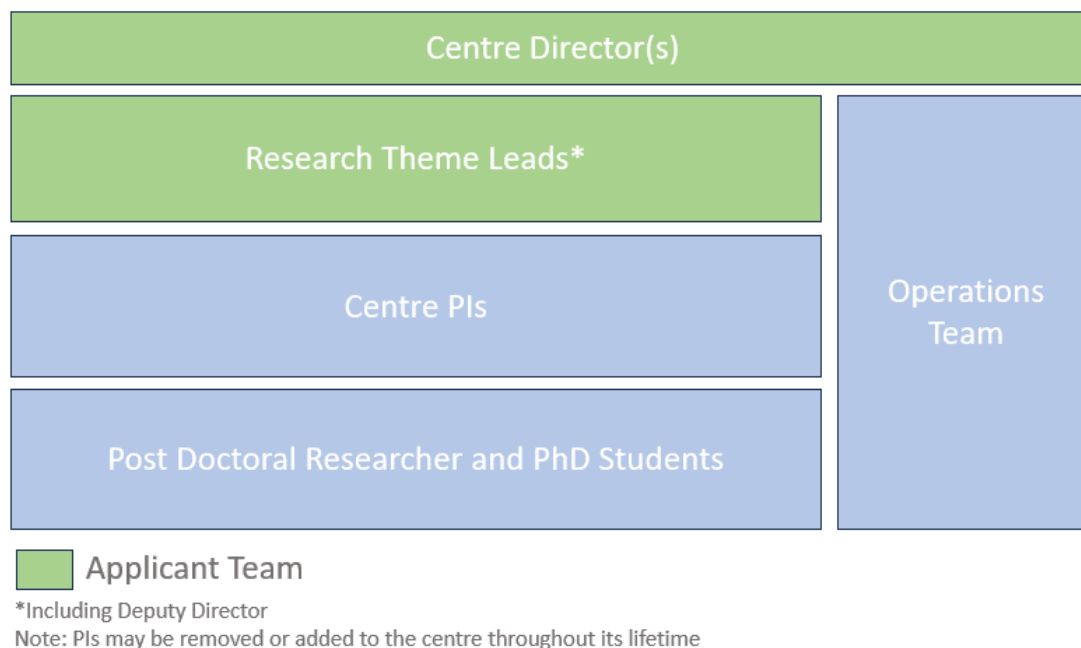


Figure 1: Graphic representation of the organisational structure of a Centre

Applicant Team

An SFI Research Centre is led by a **Centre Director** who is the scientific and technical lead of the Centre and holds overall responsibility for delivery of its objectives.

At application stage, the proposed Centre Director is the **Lead Applicant** and should have a record of internationally recognised research achievement and demonstrated ability to lead a major academic-industry partnership centre initiative.

The Centre Director leads the Applicant Team of Co-Investigators (**Research Theme Leads**), each of whom must lead a research theme in the Centre. One of the Research Theme Leads also serves as the **Deputy Director** of the Research Centre. As well as leading a research theme, the Deputy Director directly supports the Centre Director, and should play an important role in succession plans for the Centre.

At application stage, the Research Theme Leads are designated as **Co-Applicants** and will receive equal evaluation to the Lead Applicant and will hold equal accountability for the delivery of the proposed research objectives.

SFI does permit SFI Research Centres to be led by two Co-Directors, if appropriate. For the purpose of the application process one Director must take the role of Lead Applicant, with the additional Director

listed as a co-applicant. Such applications should also include a clear framework for how decisions will be made in a Co-Directorship model.

The Applicant Team is supported by a team of Centre Principal Investigators (PIs). A PI has a well-defined, important role in the proposed Research Centre. A PI would be expected to lead one or more platform and/or targeted projects, including holding budget as part of that project, and PIs may also have other roles in supporting the delivery of the proposed research programme. Each PI serves under the direction of a Research Theme Lead.

Research Bodies

SFI Research Centres support collaboration between Research Bodies across Ireland to bring together distributed excellence in a collaborative and dynamic environment, operating at a scale where significant impact can be achieved in areas of national importance.

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.

One or more Research Bodies must be designated as Coordinating Partner(s) in the proposal. 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.

All Partner Research Bodies take responsibility for the effective running and delivery of the Centre's goals, and have a shared vision for the Centre and commitment to its long-term success in alignment with institutional strategic priorities. Research Body Letters of Support submitted with a proposal should articulate the shared vision and detail the commitments.

The Research Body of the Lead Applicant is considered the **Administrative Lead Research Body** and takes the leading role in the submission of the proposal on behalf of the consortium of Research Bodies involved in the proposed Centre. The Administrative Lead Research Body must also be a Coordinating Partner.

4.2 Eligibility

The eligibility criteria set out in the below sections must be met by the Lead Applicant, Co-Applicants, other Centre PIs and all Partner Research Bodies. In addition to the specific eligibility conditions outlined below, the Lead Applicant, Co-Applicants, other Centre PIs and Research Bodies must comply with SFI's Grant General Terms and Conditions⁷.

4.2.1 Eligibility of the Applicant Team

Summary of eligibility criteria		
Centre Role	Time since PhD	SFI criteria for involvement in other RCs
Lead Applicant (Proposed Director)	≥ 8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eligible to serve as a PI in 1 additional submission to this call. - Not eligible as part of an Applicant Team in another submission to this call.

⁷ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/sfi-general-terms-and-conditions/>

		- Minimum time commitment 40% to the grant.
Co-Applicants (Proposed Research Theme Leads)	≥ 3 years	- Eligible to serve as a PI in 1 additional submission to this call. - Not eligible as part of an Applicant Team in another submission to this call.
Other Centre PIs	≥ 3 years	- Eligible to serve as a Lead Applicant, Co-Applicant or other Centre PI in 1 additional submission to this call.

Please note that SFI Research Centres are expected to be dynamic and adaptive over the eight-year period of the grant. New PIs can join the Centre during the lifetime of the grant, and existing PIs may depart if the projects they are involved in have finished. Eligibility criteria will apply, and any PI additions to the Centre's team will be subject to approval by SFI⁸.

A key objective of the SFI Research Centres programme is to improve equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) at all levels of the team and, in particular, at leadership level. An EDI Action Plan will be prepared and submitted in support of this objective at application stage (see Section 4.4.5).

Applicant Teams (Lead Applicants and Co-Applicants, as per the Letter of Offer) must not exceed 70% of any one gender to be eligible to apply for the SFI Research Centres Programme. Applicant Teams that do not meet this requirement will be deemed ineligible.

Please note that if, for example, 70% results in a fraction of a Lead Applicant or Co-Applicant, Applicant Teams should round to the nearest whole number.

All Lead and Co-Applicants must meet the following eligibility criteria:

1. Employment Status

Lead and Co-Applicants must be:

- a) Members of the academic staff of an eligible Research Body (permanent or with a contract that covers the period of the grant), or
- b) A contract researcher with a contract that covers the period of the grant, who is recognised by the Research Body as an independent investigator and will have an independent office and research space at the host Research Body for which he/she will be fully responsible for at least the duration of the SFI grant, or
- c) Individuals who will be recognised by the Research Body upon receipt of the SFI grant as a member of the academic staff or as a contract researcher as defined above. The applicant does not necessarily need to be employed by the Research Body at the time of proposal submission.
- d) If an applicant holds a secondary appointment⁹ please contact centres@sfi.ie in advance of application submission with details of those appointments. SFI eligibility checks assess the appropriateness of the time commitment and engagement with the research programme, and

⁸ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/award-management/research-centres-award-management/process-for-changesadditi/index.xml>

⁹ A secondary appointment refers to an additional appointment beyond one's primary academic contract of employment within an eligible research institution, necessitating a time commitment of no more than 50%.

the time committed should reasonably reflect the amount of funding being requested. SFI may seek additional information on how secondary appointments are being managed by the host Research Body, and SFI expects that an applicant's academic appointment with the partner Research Body should be their primary appointment, with ≥50% time commitment to the partner Research Body. Any other queries on secondary appointments and/or FTE levels must be submitted directly to SFI at centres@sfi.ie in advance of the call deadline.

2. **PhD Duration**

The Lead Applicant must hold a PhD or equivalent for at least **8 years** by the Full Proposal deadline.

Co-Applicants must hold a PhD or equivalent for at least **3 years** by the Full Proposal deadline.

The official date of a PhD is defined as the year that the degree was conferred, i.e., the year printed on the official PhD certificate. The number of years is determined by calendar year.

Applicants holding an equivalent PhD qualification as outlined in SFI's Policy on PhD Equivalence¹⁰ may be eligible but must seek approval from SFI in advance of submitting a proposal.

3. **SFI Centre Budget**

Lead and Co-Applicants must hold a minimum SFI budget of €100k from the SFI direct costs.

4.2.2 Eligibility criteria for Centre PIs

CVs are not required for Centre PIs who are not part of the Applicant Team, but if the Centre is funded, more detail on these PIs will be requested at a later stage. It is expected that each Research Body will ensure that the PI eligibility criteria are met for all PIs included in the application for funding. PIs must satisfy the eligibility criteria by the closing date for submissions of the proposal as defined in the call document.

All PIs must meet the following criteria:

- PIs must hold a PhD or equivalent for at least 3 years by the submission deadline.
- PIs must be a member of the academic staff of an eligible Research Body, or a contract researcher with a contract that covers the period of the project, who is recognised by the Research Body as an independent investigator and will have an independent office and research space at the host Research Body for which the researcher will be fully responsible for at least the duration of the SFI Research Centre project on which they work. Postdoctoral researchers, research fellows or other non-independent researchers are not eligible to be Centre PIs.
- All Centre PIs must hold a minimum SFI budget of €100k from the SFI direct costs.
- The PI is expected to have the experience, capability, and authority to mentor and supervise postgraduate students and team members.

As listed in the SFI Policy on PhD Equivalence¹⁰, in exceptional cases, approval may be sought from SFI for the discretionary appointment of PIs who do not hold PhD equivalent qualifications. In such instances, all other eligibility criteria for PI appointments will still apply. Such appointments do not qualify investigators to hold such roles in other SFI grants, nor do they make them eligible to apply for funding to other SFI programmes calls where specific eligibility criteria will still apply.

¹⁰ https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/eligibility-related-information/PHD-equivalence-policy_September_2018.pdf

4.2.3 Other Applications and SFI Grants

- An investigator may be named as a PI on a maximum of two submissions to this call. If an individual is named on two submissions to this call, they can only be named on the Applicant Team of one submission to this call.
- Directors of SFI ARC Hubs or Co-Centres (or applicants to those roles), are not eligible to apply as a member of an Applicant Team to this call. However, they are eligible to contribute to a proposal as a PI. Equally, a Director of a 2016 SFI Research Centre not applying to this call and continuing in Phase 2 is not eligible to apply as a member of an Applicant Team to this call, but they are eligible to contribute to / join a proposal as a PI.
- Co-Principal Investigators of SFI ARC Hubs or Co-Centres (or applicants to those roles), are not eligible to apply as a Director but are eligible to apply as a Co-Applicant or PI.
- Co-PIs and Funded Investigators of currently funded SFI Research Centres are eligible to join submissions to this call, subject to the requirements outlined in this section.
- In all cases, Lead and Co-Applicants must have the available time to dedicate to the submission(s) that they are a part of, and the roles set out therein.

These criteria are presented in a summary table in Appendix A.

Note: In all cases where Lead or Co-Applicants are already in receipt of significant research funding, the evaluation process will examine the commitment and workload of the Lead/Co-Applicant in determining the suitability of such an arrangement. Such applicants must include strong justification for their role in the Applicant Team.

4.2.4 Eligibility of Research Body/Bodies

Partner Research Bodies must be situated in the Republic of Ireland and be eligible for SFI funding. A list of Eligible Research Bodies is available on the SFI website¹¹. There is no maximum number of Research Bodies that can be included in the application.

At least one Partner Research Body must be an Institute of Technology or Technological University. This is to support SFI's commitment to support strong linkages between researchers in Universities, Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology.

As outlined in Section 4.1, applicants to this call must designate one or more Coordinating Partner Research Bodies.

Letters of Support from the Research Bodies of the Lead Applicant and each Co-Applicant are required at both the pre-proposal and full proposal application stages. Please see the Guidance for Applicants document for further details.

4.3 Centre Management

Effective and meaningful collaboration between the Research Bodies that form the Centre consortium, and the shared vision, commitment and support of those Research Bodies to driving the success of the Centre, is a critical aspect of the management of an SFI Research Centre. The Partner

¹¹ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/eligibility-related-information/>

Research Bodies and the Applicant Team must carefully consider and clearly explain how the Centre will be structured across Coordinating Partner(s) and other Partner Research Bodies, and how this consortium will operate and work together effectively for the success of the Centre.

The Centre must be structured and managed according to the **following guiding principles**:

- Shared commitment across all Partner Research Bodies to Centre success, guided by a unified vision.
- Development of a multi-institutional culture, focused on the development and success of all Centre team members.
- Strong leadership characteristics, and a clear and effective management structure that is aligned to the overall Centre consortium structure.
- Transparent, independent and inclusive approach for PI engagement, Centre decision-making and budget allocation.
- Operations Team structure that takes into consideration the overall Centre consortium structure such as the spread of activity across Partner Research Bodies.
- Flexibility to evolve the Centre over time, in response to evolving challenges and emerging opportunities.
- Alignment of approaches across Partner Research Bodies.

Research Centres will be expected to put a robust and appropriate management structure in place to ensure the efficient operation of the Centre. This will be led by an Executive Management Committee consisting of the Centre Director(s), Deputy Director, the Research Theme Leads, and other key Centre team members such as an Executive Director/Centre Manager. This committee will be responsible for setting the vision and research objectives, and providing management and key decision-making functions of the Centre. Furthermore, this committee will be responsible for the successful execution and delivery of the research programme, public engagement plan, EDI Action Plan, effective promotion of the SFI Research Centre brand, and the other priorities and targets of the Centre.

Successful applicants will be informed of the required governance structure when awarded funding.

4.4 Centre Activities

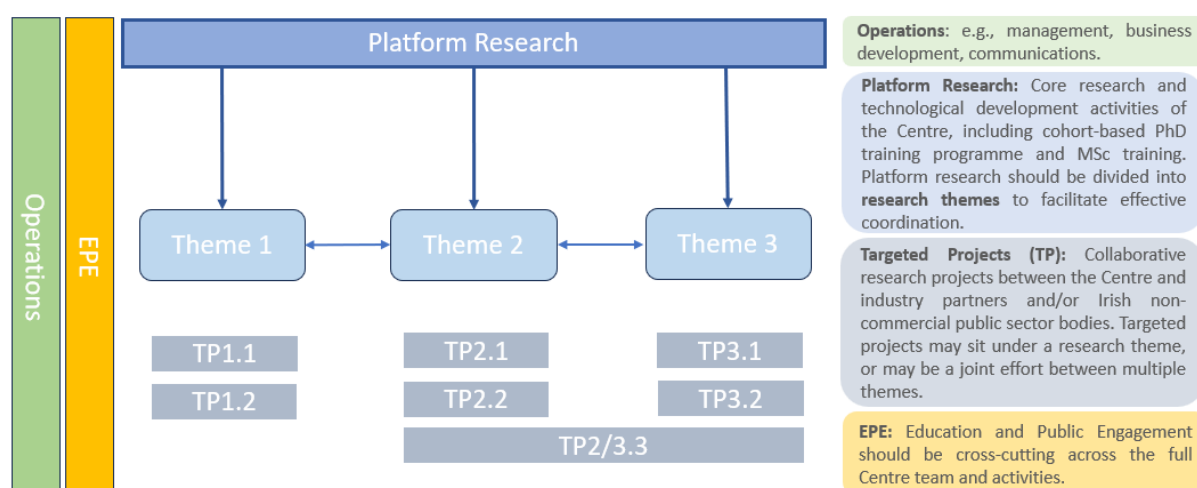


Figure 2: Graphic representation of the structure of a Centre

An SFI Research Centre should consist of the component parts outlined in the following sub-sections. Further information on the eligible costs for each component is included in Section 5.

4.4.1 Operations

The Centre will be supported to deliver on its vision by an experienced and high-performing Operations Team. The Operations Team should be structured in a manner that would best support the Centre's research programme, delivery on targets, communications and branding, robust and efficient functioning, and cohesion across different Partner Research Bodies. Responsibilities of the Operations Team may include aspects such as management, administration, business development, funding application support, communications, education and public engagement, training, and SME support.

Shared services between Centres, or between Centres and Research Body administrative and support teams, should be considered where appropriate.

4.4.2 Platform Research

The platform research of the Centre comprises the core research and technological development activities that are necessary or valuable to achieve the vision of the Centre. Consideration should be given to the cohesive integration of different disciplines of fundamental importance to our society. Where relevant, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) research should make up a significant component of the research programme and AHSS researchers should have strong leadership roles in the Centre. Successful integration of different disciplines will deliver a research programme that has the greatest potential to significantly impact our society, embodies interdisciplinary research excellence and innovation, and achieves the vision and scientific objectives of the Research Centre. Platform research projects may underpin the development of future commercialisation efforts or collaborative research projects with industry, government or through non-exchequer non-commercial funding opportunities.

A Centre's platform research should be divided into a number of themes. These themes should have a clear rationale for their selection, and should facilitate effective coordination within and across Centre themes. One Co-Applicant will be designated as Research Theme Lead for each research theme, and a Centre may put in place further management and leadership structures and processes to facilitate the successful operation of the theme.

An important part of the platform research of the Centre will be cohorts of PhD students. Each Centre will be expected to develop a strong programme of training and development for their PhD students, through a cohort-based approach across all Partner Research Bodies. This is further outlined in Section 4.4.6.

Platform research activities will include equipment or infrastructure budget that will increase the research capacity of the Centre, and will be used across a number of research projects. Centres should facilitate broad usage of equipment across Ireland and encourage partnerships and collaboration between different cohorts of researchers in Ireland, both within the Centre and beyond. Consideration should be given to equipment running and maintenance, including support staff where required.

The platform research may also include other elements as required to deliver an excellent research programme to achieve the Centre's overall vision.

The Applicant Team should plan a robust programme of excellent platform research, but it should be noted that SFI Research Centres are expected to be dynamic and adaptive. A Centre's research programme and the PIs that lead it will be expected to change in response to challenges and opportunities, requiring budgetary and strategic flexibility over the eight-year period of the grant.

4.4.3 Targeted Projects

Each Research Centre will include a number of targeted projects, each of which is a collaborative effort between the Centre and:

- one or more industry partners, or
- one or more Irish non-commercial public sector bodies (Section 5.6.3), or
- a combination of industry and Irish non-commercial public sector bodies.

Where a proposed programme of research activities involves a collaboration with an industry party or “undertaking”, for all or part of the term of the grant, applicants must demonstrate compliance with the conditions of “effective collaboration”. See Section 5.6.1 for details.

Targeted projects should be organised under the Centre’s research themes or may be a joint effort between multiple themes, as set out in Figure 2.

A Centre should plan for a number of targeted research projects at or close to launch, but many of the Centre’s targeted projects would be expected to be developed in line with the proposed business and impact plans, opportunities that arise, and developments in the Centre’s platform research projects throughout the lifetime of the Centre grant.

4.4.4 Education and Public Engagement

SFI’s **vision** for Education and Public Engagement (EPE) is that public engagement, in its varied manifestations, is embedded in the fabric and culture of the Research Centre. Meaningful engagement is undertaken because of its added value to the research, the researchers and all those associated with the grant, and ultimately because of its recognised benefit for public good. Further information and guidance are available in the supporting document EPE Framework and Impact.

SFI expects the same rigour and approach to best practice, ethics and integrity to be applied to EPE activity, as would be applied to the scientific research programme. Engagement should be an integral part of being a researcher and researchers should be encouraged and facilitated to participate in EPE-related work. It is expected that the Research Centre will develop a varied and balanced portfolio of engagement activities with clearly defined target audience(s). Examples of stakeholder and audience groups may include, but are not limited to, community groups, non-governmental organisations, advocacy groups, social enterprises, cultural and educational communities from pre-school through to primary and secondary.

SFI expects that all Centres will include some elements of deep public engagement and/or engaged research that have the potential to inform and shape the delivery of aspects of the research programme.

Centres will also be expected to contribute towards improving diversity and inclusion, by broadening participation, both geographically and amongst less represented voices.

Please note that the proposal documents should clearly outline the overall vision for the Centre’s EPE programme, demonstrating that the applicants have reflected fully on the objectives of the EPE programme from the outset. Applications should outline clearly how these objectives are planned to be achieved, giving due regard to appropriate resourcing of the activity. Approaches for stakeholder engagement and measures of success should also be outlined. It is understood that the plans for EPE will evolve in line with the development of the Centre.

Recognising that non-academic engagements are integral to overall Centre outcomes and impacts, broader impacts from the EPE programme should be described under the Impact section of the proposal.

4.4.5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The SFI Strategy 2025: *Shaping Our Future* underscores SFI's commitment to building equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the Irish research and innovation sector¹². SFI recognises that excellent research stems from diverse and inclusive teams which reflect our society and the communities we serve. As such, SFI aspires to pro-actively lead in driving the EDI agenda forward through the research and research teams that it funds. In the forthcoming SFI EDI Strategy (external), increasing the number of women and members of Historically Underserved Communities¹³ in Applicant Teams are key objectives. As such, EDI is a significant programmatic objective of this SFI Research Centres Programme 2023 call (please see Section 2). Research Centres will be expected to improve EDI through the term of the grant, through diverse gender representation at all levels of the research team and in particular at Research Centre leadership, in line with the goals and objectives of the SFI EDI Strategy.

The Research Centre's commitment to EDI, including gender balance, must be described in a Research Centre EDI Action Plan (encompassing the Research Centre's strategic EDI objectives) prepared by the Applicant Team (as outlined in the **Guidance for Applicants** document). This Research Centre EDI Action Plan must be submitted at the application stage and should reflect the Research Centre's starting position regarding EDI. As part of the EDI Action Plan, the Applicant Team should indicate how the Research Centre will improve EDI, including gender diversity, over the term of the grant with reference to research funding, decision-making processes, succession planning, training and career development across all the Research Centre's activities and at all levels of the team. The Research Centre EDI Action Plan will form an integral part of the Research Centre application and the application assessment at both Pre-Proposal and Full Proposal stages, although only an outline of the proposed EDI Action Plan will be required at the former. Progress against the Research Centre EDI Action Plan will be reviewed as part of Research Centre Progress Reviews and on an ongoing basis throughout the term of the grant.

As a **minimum** eligibility criterion, as stated in Section 4.2, SFI mandates that applications to the SFI Research Centres Programme 2023 may only have a maximum of 70% of any one gender on the Applicant Team as named in the Letter of Offer¹⁴. Applicant Teams to the SFI Research Centres Programme 2023 that do **not** meet this eligibility criterion will be deemed ineligible. However, Research Centres will be expected to continuously strive for enhanced inclusivity, equality and diversity at all levels of the Research Centre team, particularly across Research Centre leadership, throughout the term of the grant as outlined in their EDI Action Plan.

A strong commitment to EDI must be evidenced by the relevant Research Bodies as part of the application at both the Pre-Proposal and Full Proposal stages. Research Bodies must describe as part of their Letter of Support (as outlined in the **Guidance for Applicants** document on the SFI website¹⁵) how they will buttress the EDI Action Plan of the Research Centre, as well as how the Research Centre's

¹² [SFI Strategy 2025 Shaping Our Future](#)

¹³ For the purposes of this Strategy, Historically Underserved Community encompasses a broad and diverse range of historically marginalised groups including but not limited to the nine protected grounds established in the [Equal Status Acts 2000-2018](#) and socioeconomic status.

¹⁴ If, for example, 70% results in a fraction of a Lead Applicant or Co-Applicant, Applicant Teams should round to the nearest whole number.

¹⁵ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/funding-calls/sfi-research-centres/>

EDI Action Plan aligns with and is underpinned by the Research Bodies' own EDI commitments and initiatives.

To continually support and promote EDI at all levels of the Research Centre team, SFI encourages Applicant Teams to consider other measures, such as establishing an EDI Committee as part of the proposed advisory/management structures for the Research Centre and assigning members of Research Centre leadership with responsibilities for EDI.

4.4.6 Doctoral Education

The Research Centre will follow a cohort model for doctoral education. Research Centres will annually recruit cohorts of students, who are, for the purpose of this programme, defined as a group of students undertaking research projects and a programme of training that falls within the vision of the Research Centre. Although students may select individual training modules according to their individual development plans, there will be sufficient measures in place to ensure integration of the cohort(s) to encourage interaction, networking and peer-to-peer learning. The Research Centre is expected to develop structured training programmes for the cohorts, including a focus on soft skills development as well as technical development opportunities. Proposals may consider collaboration with and exposure to industry, as relevant and appropriate. Consideration should also be given to the integration of, or coherence with, other doctoral training programmes where the Centre may be involved, such as those funded through EU Framework Programmes. Adequate student representation should be considered in the execution of the Research Centre, and may also include funding, with appropriate justification, for initiatives such as student-led activities.

The Research Centre will deliver a student-focused postgraduate research experience and students should be empowered, with appropriate guidance, to define their individual research and training programme. Information must be made available to students regarding choice of supervisor and research project, programme requirements, student and supervisor roles and responsibilities, as well as clear information on registration, assessment, progression, and feedback mechanisms. Appropriate measures should be in place, for example, for research rotations before final selection of a supervisor/project or provision of appropriate guidance, to ensure that students are sufficiently informed about these choices. In addition, supervisors must guide each student in writing a Personal Career Development Plan at the beginning of their PhD which should be discussed and revised as the PhD progresses.

5 Funding

SFI expects applicants to propose a Centre scale that is optimised to the research capacity in the domain proposed, maximises the excellence of the proposal, is streamlined and delivers value for money, and features coherence and alignment across the entirety of the Centre. There is no maximum or minimum budget requirement. Applicants should be mindful of the need for sufficient funding to deliver on the Centre's mission, and the programme objectives, as well as the need for a sufficiently resourced Operations Team in the Centre.

5.1 Operations Budget

The Operations component of the Centre budget is expected to fund some or all of the non-economic¹⁶ operational running costs of the Research Centre (i.e. not to be used for research projects or EPE activities). In this regard, use of this budget must be compliant with State aid law, please see Section 5.10. Such costs should include personnel covering responsibilities such as management, administration, business development, funding application support, communications, education and public engagement, training, and SME support, as well as associated travel and related business expenses. The exact structure, composition and responsibilities of the Operations Team should be bespoke, and carefully designed to support the Centre to achieve its mission in an appropriate and efficient manner.

The Operations budget should support communications actions such as events/engagement with stakeholders (such as industry, government, research community), marketing/branding/advertising materials, training, digital media (website and social media platforms, including analytics), media engagement, photography, videography.

Consideration should be given to maximising efficiencies within and between Centre Operations Teams, as well as synergies and cohesion between Centre and Research Body administrative and support teams. As such, shared services for certain Operations roles between Centres, or between Centres and Research Body administrative and support teams should be included where appropriate. SFI reserves the right to look holistically at the full set of Operations roles and the support required across all Centres to be funded, and to work with Research Bodies to optimise the resulting structure and format of Centre Operations.

The Operations component of the Centre budget is capped at a maximum of **20%** of the SFI budget. Funding for Operations sourced directly from industry, NE-NC or other exchequer funding, or by overheads returned to the Centre, do not count towards this cap.

A contribution can be requested towards the operation of the Governance Committee, such as fees (subject to Research Body policies) and travel costs.

5.2 Platform Research Budget

The platform research comprises the core research and technological development activities of the Centre. As such, the platform research component of the Centre budget is expected to consist of the research staff, cohort-based PhD training programme, materials, travel, equipment and other costs required to deliver an excellent research programme. Funding should incentivise interdisciplinary research, and may include a strong focus on arts, humanities and/or social science research to achieve Centre objectives.

It is anticipated that the results of platform research may be of value to and accessible by some or all industry partners to the Research Centre, on a non-exclusive and non-discriminatory basis and where the Research Centre receives adequate market price remuneration. Use of this budget and access rights to any of the results of the platform research (including intellectual property rights (IPR) and non-IPR research results) must be compliant with State aid law. For further guidance see Section 5.10 below.

¹⁶ See section 2.1.1 of the Framework: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2022.414.01.0001.01.ENG

5.3 Industry Targeted Projects

Each targeted project with industry will have at least one, and perhaps a number of industry partners. Industry partners are expected to make both a material contribution to the targeted project (in terms of cash and in-kind contributions described above), as well as an intellectual contribution to the goals, objectives, deliverables and execution of the targeted project. Applicants/PIs and industry partners are encouraged to review the *'IP Protocol Resource Guide'* document¹⁷ when considering industry cost share levels. Targeted projects must comply with the definition of “effective collaboration” as per the European Commission's Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation (2022/C 414/01)¹⁸ and with the conditions in paragraphs 29 and 30 of the Framework (as appropriate) with respect to the use and/or allocation of research results or IPR; see Section 5.10 .

The total budget allocation to the Centre targeted projects with industry is flexible and will depend on the funds allocated to other aspects of the Centre budget, as discussed above. For each targeted project, a collaborative research agreement (or IPR agreement) must be ‘agreed’ with, or signed, by the relevant partner(s) (Research Body, or Bodies, and the industry partner(s)). SFI requires that an Industry Collaboration Form is completed and returned to SFI for each collaborative project with industry and that a CRA be recorded against the cost share targets for the Research Centre. Please see Section 5.10 for further details.

5.4 Centre Strategic Fund

An SFI Research Centre should have a dedicated fund held in reserve for the support of opportunities that may arise for the Centre during its lifetime, or for other strategic purposes.

Examples of the uses of such a fund could include, for instance:

- Funding to expand the Research Centre in new directions, either in response to a newly emerging opportunity, in response to review recommendations, or in response to a challenge encountered by the Centre.
- Incentivisation of NE-NC applications, such as supporting early career researchers to develop research that forms the basis of a future application, or supporting projects that miss out on NE-NC funding due to funder budget constraints.
- Funding to support commercialisation opportunities.
- Funding to reserve the time of certain PIs from institutional commitments, for a specific timebound period, in order to dedicate greater time to a high-priority Centre-related activity. Such use of funding would have to be clearly justified, and would require the support and agreement of the PI's Research Body.
- Funding to bring on new partners, increase Centre diversity, or otherwise evolve the team and partner composition.

The Centre Strategic Fund cannot be used to exceed the Operations Team budget cap. The Centre Strategic Fund requires a transparent mechanism for deciding where funding is assigned, such as by decision of the Centre's Executive Management Committee or Governance Committee. Use of this budget must be compliant with State aid law, please see Section 5.10.

¹⁷ [IP Protocol Resource Guide](#)

¹⁸ [Communication from the Commission Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation 2022/C 414/01](#)

5.5 Education and Public Engagement Budget

The Education and Public Engagement component of the Centre budget supports the delivery of the Centre's EPE programme. The costs for delivery of the EPE Programme are excluded from the cost share model, please see Section 5.7. Use of this budget must be compliant with State aid law, please see Section 5.10.

Such costs may include, but are not necessarily limited to, direct costs of EPE activities, travel related to EPE efforts, costs to engage in collaborative EPE-related partnerships with other organisations, and costs related to EPE training. Please note that personnel required to run the Centre's EPE programme at an operational level, such as dedicated management for EPE, should be included as a cost in the operations budget, rather than the EPE budget. The engagement costs associated with specific engaged research work need not be included in this budget but rather can be included in the overall platform research budget.

As a guideline, **at least 5%** of the SFI budget should be allocated to the totality of the EPE programme in the Centre. This includes costs such as dedicated management for EPE that would be part of the Operations Team budget/cap. Industry, NE-NC and/or exchequer sources can be used to support and expand the Centre's EPE programme.

5.6 Cost Share Model

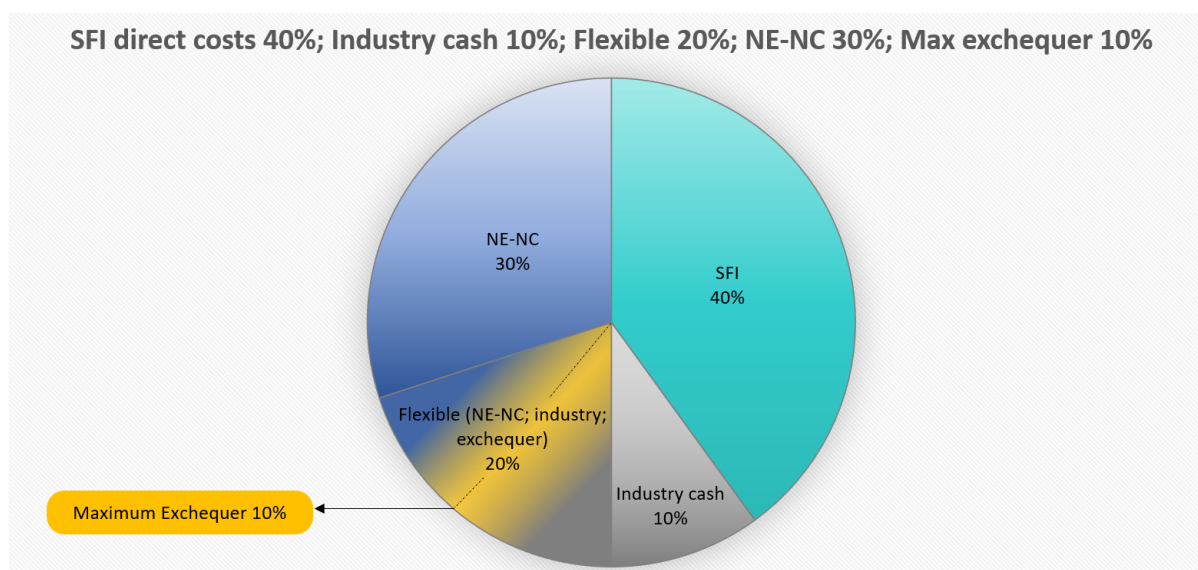


Figure 3: Cost Share Model

The cost share model that this programme will follow is shown in Figure 3. The model includes an overall Centre budget which comprises a maximum 40% contribution from SFI (direct costs, minus the specific budget items that are outside the cost share model as described in Section 5.7) with the remaining 60% coming from industry (both cash and in-kind), NE-NC (cash only) and exchequer funding sources (cash only, see Section 5.6.3). A minimum of 10% of the total Centre budget must come from industry cash sources and 30% from NE-NC sources. Centres have flexibility in securing the remainder of the co-funding required through additional cash secured from industry or NE-NC sources, industry in-kind commitments (reflecting the collaborative nature of the targeted projects) or eligible sources of exchequer funding (**maximum 10%**; see list of eligible exchequer funding sources in Section 5.6.3).

5.6.1 Industry Cost Share

The following section details what can be counted towards **industry cost share**.

Cash (direct costs) and in-kind from partially funded collaborative research

The majority of targeted projects in the Research Centres are partially funded collaborative research projects, where costs are shared by SFI and the industry partner. The cash (direct costs) and in-kind contributions from the industry partner can be counted towards the industry cost share.

In the case of a partially funded collaborative research project, the IPR normally resides with the Research Body and access rights (e.g., by way of a licence) may be allocated to the industry partner, which reflects their contribution. The Research Centre should receive compensation equivalent to the market price for the IPR which result from their activities. The value of any industry partner contribution may be deducted from the compensation paid.

SFI grant funds are **not** permitted to be used directly or indirectly for wholly (or fully) funded collaborative research projects in the absence of appropriate controls. This may be subject to audit.

Cash donations

Cash gifts/donations in the form of an unencumbered research grant from a company which are used to support the research or EPE activities of the Research Centre can be counted toward the industry cash cost share target.

SME cost share

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.

Example: A Centre has a target of €1m in industry cash over their 8-year grant duration. The Centre secures €200k in cash from SMEs and €600k from MNCs towards collaborative research projects. The Centre's cash target reduces from €1m to €800k, and the Centre has met its revised target.

Membership Scheme

Research Centres may, at their discretion, choose to implement a membership scheme for industry partners engaging with the Centre. It is envisaged that a membership scheme would charge companies to participate in the activities of the Research Centre and contribute towards the running costs of the Research Centre. All funds raised through the membership scheme can be counted towards the industry cost share. The membership scheme, including any benefits arising from the membership (e.g., in terms of access to research results/IPR), must be compliant with State aid law. Please see Section 5.10 for further details.

In-kind contributions

Under effective collaboration there must be a common objective based on the division of labour and joint definition of project scope, participation in its design, contribution to its implementation and

sharing of its financial, technological, scientific and other risks, as well as its results. In addition, the conditions relating to the allocation between the parties of the results and/or intellectual property rights arising from the collaboration comply with one of the conditions set out in paragraphs 29 and 30 (as appropriate) of the 2022 Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation (2022/C 414/01)¹⁹. To this end, in-kind contributions to industry collaborative projects are expected, and these can be counted towards the overall industry cost share.

Industry in-kind contributions include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following items:

- The cost of industry scientists, engineers and technicians' time while assigned to working on industry collaborative projects with the Research Centre
- Equipment
- Software
- Materials
- Data
- Source code

Further details on SFI's policy with respect to industry in-kind contributions may be found on the SFI website²⁰.

Industry funding that has already been earmarked against Irish exchequer funding (such as supports provided by IDA Ireland or Enterprise Ireland) may not be counted as a qualifying contribution to the Centre budget.

5.6.2 Non-Exchequer Non-Commercial (NE-NC) Funding

Funding for Centre activities that is received from funding bodies such as EU Framework Programmes, Wellcome Trust, registered charities, not-for-profit organisations and donations from individuals can be counted towards NE-NC cost share. This can be in the form of competitively awarded funding, or non-competitively awarded funding such as philanthropic and charitable donations.

Only direct costs from NE-NC sources can be counted as cost share.

In-kind contributions from NE-NC sources cannot be counted as cost share.

5.6.3 Exchequer Funding

The following forms of exchequer funding will be counted as part of the cost share model.

1. Funding received from a Government Department or non-commercial public sector body for a direct collaboration between this entity and the Research Centre. Note, this does not include

¹⁹ [Communication from the Commission Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation 2022/C 414/01](#)

²⁰ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/budget-finance-related-policies/>

funding through regular competitive programme calls, but should be a specific jointly-defined project, with engagement and collaboration between the two sides.

2. Non-SFI exchequer funding, competitively secured from other non-commercial public sector organisations for collaborations with industry, such as the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund. Note, the project with industry must be collaborative and taking place under a CRA. Only the exchequer portion is counted, not industry.
3. Funding awarded under strategic initiatives chosen by SFI. For the purposes of this call this category consists of SFI Challenge funding. Programmes may be added or removed after the launch of funded Centres, and any change to this category will be updated on the SFI website.

In-kind contributions from Irish exchequer sources such as other funding agencies, Government Departments or other Agencies of the State cannot be counted as cost share.

Any changes to eligible exchequer funding after the launch of successfully funded proposals will be communicated to all Centres, and will be available on the SFI website.

5.6.4 Overheads on Cost Share

Cash projections presented in the business plan must be provided in direct costs, i.e., must be net of any overhead paid to the Research Body. However, if non-SFI overhead paid to the Research Body is given directly to the Research Centre (or part thereof), then this amount can be counted as cost share contributions.

5.7 Budget Outside of Cost Share Model

The following categories of Centre budget will be outside of the cost share model:

- Non-staff EPE costs.
- Equipment up to a maximum of 5% of the total SFI direct costs. Please note that greater than 5% of the total SFI direct costs can be requested for equipment costs, but only a maximum of 5% of the total SFI direct costs for equipment will be outside of the cost share model.

5.8 Eligible Costs

Eligible costs include:

- Contributions to salaries/stipends of research staff hired specifically to carry out the research programme;
- Contributions towards salaries of operations staff (e.g. Executive Director or CEO, Centre Manager, EU Grants Manager, EPE staffing, Administration staff);
- Materials and consumables, equipment, travel;
- Teaching buyout/replacement for Technological University/Institute of Technology sector applicants (see Section 5.8.1);
- Teaching replacement after eligible leave (see Section 5.8.2);
- Access to facilities and services not available to the applicant, including test-bed facilities for technology demonstration;
- SFI-approved access charges;

- Travel fellowships and travel costs associated with hosting senior international researchers in the proposed Research Centre;
- Directly related EPE costs, including a contribution towards dedicated EPE staffing and funding to support collaborations with EPE partners;
- Costs associated with the Research Centre Governance Committee (fees as per Research Body policy, plus travel costs);
- Conference and workshop organisation costs.

Examples of ineligible costs include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- Contingency or miscellaneous costs;
- Entertainment costs;
- Technology transfer or patent costs;
- Legal fees;
- Journal subscriptions;
- Relocation expenses.

5.8.1 Teaching Replacement (TU/IoT sector applicants only)

In order to support enhanced focus on research activities within the TU/IoT sector, Applicants (Lead and Co-Applicants) from TUs/IoTs can apply for teaching buyout of up to 50% of their teaching load for the full duration of the grant. In addition, Centre PIs from TUs/IoTs can apply for teaching buyout of up to 50% of their teaching load for the duration of their Platform/Targeted Project. Salary scales for replacement lecturers based in TUs/IoT must be reasonable and justified appropriately within the budget justification. Requests for teaching replacement must be included in the requested budget and detailed in the budget justification. Teaching replacement requests must be pro-rata and proportional to the time commitment.

5.8.2 Teaching Replacement after Eligible Leave

In order to support enhanced focus on research activities following periods of leave (see eligibility criteria below), Applicants (Lead and Co-Applicants) are entitled to request funding for teaching buyout of up to 50% of their teaching load for a period of up to 12 months. Such requests should be included in the requested budget and detailed in the budget justification. Any Applicant who has taken consecutive documented eligible leave (minimum 12 weeks) since 1st January 2012 and has since returned to work is eligible to request funding for teaching buyout. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Statutory adoptive leave
- Statutory parental leave
- Statutory maternity leave
- Statutory paternity leave
- Carer's leave
- Long-term medical illness leave
- Conscription

Academic staff who have returned to an academic position having worked for a minimum of two years in a science- or engineering-related industry. If an application is successful, Applicants applying for eligible leave must provide SFI with a short statement detailing their eligibility for teaching buyout, and the start and end dates of their eligible leave, if applicable. In addition, Applicants must also produce documentary evidence of their eligibility from their host institution's Human Resources (HR) Department or, where applicable, the HR Department of their employer at the time of their eligible leave period(s). Teaching buyout costs should be calculated on the basis of hiring a temporary lecturer (e.g., at point 1 on the Assistant Lecturer salary scale, or equivalent point on the institutional scale) regardless of the seniority of the prospective applicant. Requests must be pro-rata and proportional to the time commitment. Applicants who have previously received funding for teaching buyout after eligible leave are not eligible to apply for teaching buyout a second time. Further information on SFI's eligible and ineligible costs can be found in the Grant Budget Policy and the associated SFI Team Member Salary Scales²¹.

5.9 SFI Overheads

In addition to the direct costs, SFI also makes an indirect, or overhead, contribution which is reflected as a percentage (currently 30%) of the "modified" total direct costs (i.e., total direct costs less the cost of equipment) of SFI's contribution. Overheads are payable as a contribution to the Research Body for the indirect costs of hosting SFI-funded research programmes and are intended to enable the Research Body to develop internationally competitive research infrastructure and support services, including contributions towards the costs of technology transfer and filing and maintenance of patents.

Indirect costs (overheads) must be used to support non-economic activities, in line with compliance with State aid law (see Section 5.10).

SFI will ask Research Bodies to clearly describe how they will support the proposed Centre, both as a partner and as a recipient of overhead funding.

5.10 State Aid and SFI Grant Funding

As per SFI's Grant Conditions (inclusive of SFI's General Terms & Conditions²², Letters of Offer and SFI Policy documents²³), all SFI funding granted is subject to, and must be compliant with, State aid legislation based on Article 107(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)²⁴.

Namely, research activities undertaken as part of a grant awarded under the SFI Research Centre programme, and agreed to subject to SFI's Grant Conditions, must be "non-economic" in nature and be designed to ensure that any funding received does not, directly or indirectly, give rise to the granting of State aid.

Where an application for funding involves an 'undertaking'²⁵ or industry party, recipients of grant funding under the SFI Research Centre programme are required to demonstrate compliance with the

²¹ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/budget-finance-related-policies/>

²² <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/sfi-general-terms-and-conditions>

²³ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance>

²⁴ [Commission Notice on the notion of State aid as referred to in Article 107\(1\) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union \(2016/C 262/01\)](#)

²⁵ The concept of an "undertaking" under EU competition law rules is an entity that is engaged in an "economic activity" regardless of its legal status or the way that it is financed. An activity is economic in nature when it involves offering goods or services on a market.

conditions of “effective collaboration” and the conditions relating to the allocation between the parties of the results and/or intellectual property rights arising from the collaboration comply with one of the conditions set out in paragraphs 29 and 30 (as appropriate) of the 2022 Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation (2022/C 414/01) (the “Framework”²⁶). SFI has set out guidance to support how the programme of research or project is developed and undertaken in accordance with these conditions. See ‘Guidance on State aid for applicants to, and recipients of, SFI Grant funding’ for further information²⁷.

Where a proposed programme of research activities involves a collaboration with an industry party or “undertaking”, for all or part of the term of the grant, applicants must demonstrate compliance with the conditions of “effective collaboration” and complete an “Industry Collaboration Form” (ICF). The ICF is to assist applicants in defining the relationship with the relevant industry partners in order to comply with the conditions of “effective collaboration”.

SFI require that the ICF is completed and returned to SFI on or before the date that the Collaborative Research (or Intellectual Property Rights) Agreement has been ‘agreed’ with, or signed by, the relevant partner(s). A copy of each CRA arising from the grant must be held on file by the relevant Research Body. SFI may request a copy of the signed CRA to be provided (as advised in the Grant Terms & Conditions) and held on file by SFI for audit purposes. Further information on the role of the CRA and SFI’s ex-post State aid verification checks (i.e., on-going checks after the granting of funds / partial funds) can be found in ‘Guidance on State aid for applicants to, and recipients of, SFI Grant funding’ on the SFI website²⁷. The ICF and related guidance, inclusive of an FAQ document, can be found on the SFI website²⁷.

The costs of the proposed programme of research activities should be calculated on the basis of generally accepted accounting principles²⁷. SFI Research Centres are required to put in place a full economic costing model for all activities of the Research Centre. Where SFI funded Research Centres carry out activities of both economic and non-economic nature, the costs, funding and revenues of each of the two activities must be clearly accounted for separately^{28,29}.

Applicants are advised to seek independent legal advice in advance of applying to SFI for funding where further clarification is sought.

6 Review Procedure and Criteria

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 6.5. Reviewers engaged by the funder must agree to certify to a declaration of confidentiality (in a Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality

²⁶ [Communication from the Commission Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation 2022/C 414/01](#)

²⁷ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/state-aid>

²⁸ Where SFI funded Research Centres engage in both economic and non-economic activities, the economic uses must consume exactly the same inputs (such as material, equipment, labour and fixed capital) as the non-economic activities and the capacity allocated each year to such economic activities does not exceed 20 % of the Research Centre’s overall annual capacity.

²⁹ Please see paragraph 21 of the [Framework](#): “Where the research organisation or research infrastructure is used almost exclusively for a non-economic activity, its funding may fall outside State aid rules in its entirety(41), provided that the economic use remains purely ancillary, that is to say corresponds to an activity which is directly related to and necessary for the operation of the research organisation or research infrastructure or intrinsically linked to its main non- economic use, and which is limited in scope”

Statement) prior to conducting a review. At the Full Proposal 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 of the funder. The identity of experts who serve as pre-proposal panel members and postal reviewers shall remain confidential and shall not be disclosed to the applicants. Decisions resulting from the evaluation will be provided to the applicants, including the anonymised review comments, following the conclusion of the review process. The funder shall not be liable for the release of information concerning proposals to third parties by those individuals involved in the review procedure. The application process and review procedure will follow four stages; Expression of Interest, Pre-Proposal Submission, Full Proposal Submission and Full Proposal Interview, as outlined below. Should circumstances arise, 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 Executive and Board of the funder.

6.1 Expression of Interest

Applicant Teams intending to submit an application to the call must provide an Expression of Interest (EoI) to centres@sfi.ie no later than 1st November 2023, 13:00 Dublin, Ireland local time. This information is mandatory and is required by SFI for planning purposes. Any Pre-Proposal submitted where an EoI has not been provided will be rejected without review. The EoI will not undergo any evaluation, and no Applicant Teams will be eliminated from the process on the basis of their EoI. A template for submission of an EoI can be found on the call website³⁰ and in the **Guidance for Applicants** document³⁰. This template must be used. Please note that the EoI should only include details, such as the proposal title and abstract, that are non-confidential.

6.2 Pre-Proposal Submission

The deadline for submission of a Pre-Proposal application is no later than 13th December 2023, 13:00 Dublin, Ireland local time. The Pre-Proposal must follow the structure outlined in the **Guidance for Applicants** document. Only Pre-Proposals from an Applicant Team that have previously submitted an EoI will be accepted and evaluated. Pre-Proposals will only be accepted through SESAME. Further guidance for submission of a Pre-Proposal can be found in the **Guidance for Applicants** document.

Pre-Proposals will be reviewed by a panel of experts who will evaluate the proposal using the review criteria outlined below. Applications submitted by the deadline will be assessed for eligibility and then sent for evaluation. The panel will be provided with all documentation relating to each application and will be tasked with providing a list of proposals ranked in order of priority for invitation to Full Proposal stage. The ranked list of proposals will inform the final decision as to which proposals will be invited to Full Proposal stage. Only those Pre-Proposals that have demonstrated a high-level of excellence, based on the review criteria, will progress to the Full Proposal stage. Taking into account the recommendation of the panel, the final decisions for invitation to Full Proposal stage are at the sole and exclusive discretion of the funder.

³⁰ <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/funding-calls/sfi-research-centres/>

6.3 Full Proposal Submission

The deadline for submission of a Full Proposal application is no later than 25th September 2024, 13:00 Dublin, Ireland local time. The Full Proposal must follow the structure outlined in the **Guidance for Applicants** document. Only Full Proposals from an Applicant Team invited by the funder to submit a Full Proposal will be accepted and evaluated. Full Proposals will only be accepted through SESAME. Further guidance for submission of a Full Proposal can be found in the **Guidance for Applicants** document.

Applications submitted by the deadline will be assessed for eligibility and eligible proposals will be sent for subject expert peer review. For each proposal under evaluation, SFI will solicit between five and seven written reviews (i.e., postal review) from international topic experts who will evaluate the proposal using the review criteria outlined below. Based on the evaluations submitted by the postal reviewers, the funder will select the proposals that have demonstrated a high-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 awarded to proposals on the basis of review criteria, from the written reviews, are below the threshold for funding and that the application will not proceed to the Full Proposal Interview stage. Those applicants who are not invited to the Full Proposal Interview stage will be declined. Anonymised reviewer comments will be made available to applicants invited to interview. It is anticipated that invitations for the Full Proposal Interview will be issued in Q4 2024.

6.4 Full Proposal Interview

The Full Proposal Interview is expected to be held during Q1 2025. Details of the structure and operation of the final panel will be released at that time.

The panel will comprise high-level members, such as Vice Presidents of Research from universities, international research leaders, senior representatives from private and social enterprise, entrepreneurs and experts in public engagement. The panel will be provided with all documentation relating to each application and will be tasked with providing a list of fundable proposals ranked in order of priority for funding. The ranked list of fundable proposals will inform the final decision as to which proposals are to be funded. Taking into account the recommendation of the panel, the final funding decisions are at the sole and exclusive discretion of the Executive and Board of the funder. It is anticipated that the decision for funding will be made in Q1 2025 and that the new Research Centres grants will commence in January 2026.

6.5 Review Criteria

Applications will be evaluated by rigorous international peer review on the basis of the following review criteria at both Pre-Proposal and Full Proposal stage. Narrative and a score (1-5) will be provided for each criterion:

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 CVs³¹ (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

³¹ <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

7 Grant Management

7.1 Reporting

Annual scientific reports

Each year, on a calendar year basis, a report must be submitted to SFI by the Lead Investigator (Centre Director) that summarises the progress, outputs/outcomes and achievements of all components of the Centre grant. The purpose of this report will be to capture individual activities relating to the objectives of the programme as described, with input from the industry partners and non-commercial public bodies where appropriate. Submission of annual reports will be made through SESAME. All named Applicants within the Centre will have access to SESAME for the purposes of post-award reporting requirements.

Key Performance Indicator (KPI) targets

Lead Applicants will also be required to submit bi-yearly metrics associated with both near and far term outputs, which will be in direct support of the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The categories and exact format of KPIs that will be used throughout the Research Centre lifetime will be determined prior to grant launch, and will not be part of the proposal evaluation process.

Financial Reports

The Applicant Team will be required to submit financial reports detailing expenditure against the grant to SFI as detailed in the individual Grant Agreements. Additionally, the grant holders will be required to submit Industry Cost Share Reports on a six-monthly basis. This report documents the cost share (cash and in-kind) received by the Research Centre from the industry partners.

State Aid

SFI will monitor and verify, on an on-going basis and as required, the Partner Research Bodies' compliance with State aid law. Upon request, the Research Body will provide the Foundation with all documentation reasonably required to satisfy SFI that the Research Body complies with State aid law. The Research Body is responsible for retaining such documentary records as are required to demonstrate compliance with State aid law, and ensure, where relevant, that all necessary third-party consents are procured to allow for such documentation to be disclosed to SFI.

Please note that regarding all reporting requirements, grant holders that fail to comply with these reporting requirements run the risk of having their grant payments suspended.

7.2 Progress Reviews

Centres will undergo progress reviews at different stages throughout the Centre lifetime. A review panel of distinguished researchers, scientists, engineers and individuals with significant commercialisation and translational/applied experiences are convened to evaluate the Centres. One member of each panel will also hold specialist EPE expertise. The purpose of the progress reviews is to allow SFI to evaluate the progress of the Centre against the programme objectives, cost share and other targets, and the specific mission of the Centre.

8 SFI Policies and Positions

In addition to complying with SFI's Grant General Terms & Conditions, applicants are expected to be familiar and consult with the policies/positions of SFI and with all relevant national policies when preparing their application. See **Guidance for Applicants** document on the SFI website³² for further details on SFI's policies and positions.

9 Further Information

Applicants should carefully review the **Guidance for Applicants** document before preparing an application. Applicants must use templates provided and adhere to all guidelines. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document will be available on the SFI website³². For all additional queries please contact: centres@sfi.ie

10 Definitions

Lead Applicant	<p>The Lead Applicant (also referred to as the Lead Investigator) is the administrative lead for the Research Centre proposal and will serve as the primary point of contact for SFI during the review process.</p> <p>Where the proposal is successful and a grant is awarded, they will be recognised as the/a Research Centre Director.</p> <p>As per the Grant Conditions, they and the Co-Investigators will be responsible for the scientific and technical direction of the grant, along with other responsibilities described therein.</p>
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³² <https://www.sfi.ie/funding/funding-calls/sfi-research-centres/>

Co-Applicant	<p>A Co-Applicant will be a Co-Investigator in the proposed Research Centre and will be recognised as such in the Letter of Offer.</p> <p>Where the proposal is successful and a grant is awarded, they will be recognised as the Research Theme Leads (see Section 4).</p>
Applicant Team	<p>An Applicant Team is defined as the Lead Applicant and Co-Applicants. The Applicant Team submits a proposal for funding under the Research Centres programme and where the grant is awarded, each Applicant Team member will be named on the Letter of Offer as per the Grant Conditions.</p> <p>As part of the review process for the Research Centres Programme, the same eligibility requirements will be applied to both the Lead and the Co-Applicants.</p> <p>Where a grant is awarded, the Lead Applicant and Co-Applicants will hold equal accountability for the delivery of the proposed research programme.</p>
Centre Director	<p>Where a grant is awarded, the Lead Applicant will serve as the Centre Director. The Centre Director(s) will be responsible for setting the strategic direction and overseeing the operation of the Research Centre. A Research Centre may choose to have one other Director, referring to the two Directors as Co-Directors.</p>
Principal Investigator (PI)	<p>A Principal Investigator (PI) has a well-defined, important role in the proposed Research Centre. A PI would be expected to lead one or more Platform and/or Targeted Project and may have other roles in supporting the delivery of the proposed research programme.</p>
Research Body	<p>A list of Eligible Research Bodies can be found here:</p> <p>http://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/eligibility-related-information/</p>
Administrative Lead Research Body	<p>The Research Body of the Lead Applicant is considered the Administrative Lead Research Body.</p> <p>The Administrative Lead Research Body takes the leading role in the submission of the proposal on behalf of the consortium of Research Bodies involved in the proposed Research Centre.</p> <p>The Administrative Lead Research Body must also be a Coordinating Partner (see below).</p> <p>All Research Bodies involved in an SFI Research Centre will be subject to compliance with SFI's Grant <u>General Terms and Conditions</u>.</p>
Coordinating Partner Research Body	<p>A Coordinating Partner 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. Coordinating Partners take responsibility for the effective running and delivery of the Centre's goals, and have a shared vision for the Centre and commitment to its long-term success in alignment with institutional strategic priorities.</p> <p>One or more Research Bodies must be designated as Coordinating Partner(s) in the proposal.</p> <p>All Research Bodies involved in an SFI Research Centre will be subject to compliance with SFI's Grant <u>General Terms and Conditions</u>, including the responsibilities therein.</p>
Partner Research Body	<p>A Partner Research Body is a Research Body to which at least one PI is attributed and is a team member of the Research Centre.</p> <p>All Research Bodies involved in an SFI Research Centre will be subject to the SFI Grant <u>General Terms and Conditions</u>, including the responsibilities therein.</p>
Industry Partner	<p>An industry partner is a company which collaborates with the grant holder on a project or programme of research activities for all or part of the term of the grant. Such activities</p>

	<p>must be implemented in compliance with the conditions of “effective collaboration” with both sides pursuing a common objective based on the division of labour and jointly defining its scope, participating in its design, contributing to its implementation and sharing its financial, technological, scientific and other risks, as well as its results. In addition the conditions relating to the allocation between the parties of the results and/or intellectual property rights arising from the collaboration must comply with one of the conditions set out in paragraphs 29 and 30 (as appropriate) of the 2022 Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation (2022/C 414/01). See Section 5.10 above for further details.</p> <p>An industry partner will make a financial contribution (through cash or in-kind contribution) to the budget of the Research Centre as part of this collaboration.</p> <p>An industry partner may also support a Centre in the form of an unencumbered donation, or through engagement in and support of Centre Education and Public Engagement (EPE) activities.</p> <p>Industry partners are not eligible to receive funding through the grant.</p>
Academic Collaborator	<p>An academic collaborator is a person or team that typically works in a Research Body and is a significant source of expertise and experience in a specific area of research relevant to the Centre.</p> <p>Academic collaborators are not eligible to receive funding through the grant.</p>
Non-Commercial Public Sector Body	<p>The Public Sector is made up of all bodies controlled by the Government. It includes Central Government, Local Government, non-commercial state agencies and commercial companies in government control. A list of Public Sector Bodies can be found through the Central Statistics Office, including those Public Sector Bodies that are of a non-commercial nature:https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rpbi/registerofpublicsectorbodies2022-provisional/publicsector/</p>
'2012 Research Centre', '2013 Research Centre' or '2016 Research Centre'	<p>In the context of this call document, '2012 Research Centre' or '2013 Research Centre' or '2016 Research Centre' means one of the SFI Research Centres which are currently funded as a result of the 2012, 2013 or 2016 SFI Research Centres calls.</p>

Appendix A

		I can apply as		
		PI	PI on Applicant Team	Director
I am currently a	Director of a 2012/2013 Phase 2 SFI Research Centre	YES	YES	YES
	Director of a 2016 Phase 2 SFI Research Centre which is not applying to this call and continuing to Phase 2	YES (1 application)	NO	NO
	Director of a Co-Centre or ARC Hub, or Lead Applicant on a proposal to the ARC Hubs or Co-Centres Programme	YES (1 application)	NO	NO
	Co-PI of a currently funded 2012, 2013 or 2016 Phase 2 Research Centre	YES	YES	YES*
	FI of a currently funded 2012, 2013 or 2016 Phase 2 Research Centre	YES	YES	YES
	Co-PI of a Co-Centre or ARC Hub, or Co-Applicant on a proposal to the ARC Hubs or Co-Centres Programme.	YES	YES	NO
	Translational researcher in ARC Hub or FI in Co-Centre	YES	YES	YES

*PIs in a 2016 Centre, which is not applying to this call and continuing in Phase 2, will need to step down to FI and provide a letter of support from the Director of the 2016 Centre.

NOTE:

- Unless otherwise stated in this table the number of allowed submissions to the call as Director or PI are those outlined in Table 1 of the call document.
- All applicants must meet the individual eligibility criteria set out in the call document.