Next Stage Digital Economy

Call type: Invitation for proposals

Closing date: 16:00 on 09 October 2014

Related themes: Digital Economy

Summary

Working in close partnership with the Technology Strategy Board, the Connected Digital Economy Catapult and with support from Microsoft Research, the Research Councils UK Digital Economy (DE) Theme is seeking to promote the realisation of impact and enhanced exploitation of the outcomes arising from its investments in the research base. This call is designed to consolidate, harness and build upon existing DE knowledge and skills arising from DE Theme-funded and related funded awards to help accelerate the research outcomes and outputs to the next stage and create more real impact (be it economic, societal or cultural).

The call will support up to five interdisciplinary and user-focused centres operating over a five-year period which draw substantially on the outputs, knowledge and positioning of DE expertise and demonstrations resulting from previous DE Theme funding. Each centre will be of a sufficient scope and size to achieve critical mass; that is, it will attract additional requisite funding and support from partners and the host universities and will develop committed routes for exploitation as well as grow the pool of DE trained interdisciplinary researchers.

The DE Theme will be partnering with AHRC, ESRC, the Technology Strategy Board, Microsoft Research and the Digital Catapult in order to deliver this goal. Specifically the Digital Catapult will work with the successfully funded network of centres to identify further routes and activities to generate impact. Microsoft Research will welcome applications to access dedicated Cloud Computing resources to support these centres through the Azure for Research programme.

Background

The Research Councils UK (RCUK) Digital Economy Theme

The RCUK Digital Economy Theme is supporting research and doctoral training to rapidly realise the transformational impact of digital technologies on aspects of community life, cultural experiences, future society and the economy. This addresses key societal challenges and social change across a wide number of
different key sectors (e.g. energy, transport, healthcare, services, Government, and the creative industries).

Achieving the Digital Economy vision requires the bringing together of a unique community of researchers (from diverse disciplines including social science, engineering, computer science, the arts, humanities and medical research) and users (people, business, government, the third sector) to study and understand the fundamental challenges embedded in finding viable solutions to real digital economy problems, which can have significant impact.

**The 2012 Digital Economy Theme Impact Review**

Please refer to: http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/xrcprogrammes/Digital/review/

The Impact Review confirmed that the DE Theme’s investments in research and skills are producing significant research outcomes and impact and it has a leading role in the overall impact agenda. However, more work needs to be done to capitalise on this leading position and move to the next stage, to help the journey to creating real economic, societal and cultural impact.

A key recommendation arising from the Impact Review was a desire for Digital Economy researchers to not only demonstrate the academic impact of their research, but also show the wider impact and what had changed as a result outside the institutions responsible for the research. Furthermore, the Review recognised that those DE Theme investments which had a critical mass had attracted considerable support and leverage from industry and the host universities. This then made for more successful research outcomes and impact.

It is evident that these critical mass sized investments clearly deliver an important facilitation role in supporting interdisciplinary DE research; to engender the DE mind-set and to develop those people with the appropriate skills to take this agenda forward.

**Funding available**

In total the DE Theme will provide up to £11M at 80% FEC with possible case by case funding from the Technology Strategy Board of up to £2M across the 2014/15 and 2015/16 financial years. At 100% FEC, this represents a total value of up to £16.25M funding being available.

Up to five Next Stage DE centres will be announced across the 2014/15 and 2015/16 financial years and can be of up to 60 months in duration.

**Focus of this Call**

The RCUK Digital Economy (DE) Theme is seeking to promote the realisation of impact and enhanced exploitation of the outcomes arising from its investment in the research base. This call is designed to build on the evidence and take forward some of the recommendations arising from the DE Impact Review. The aim is to raise DE research to a new level of increased take up and exploitation, to really make a difference, and where real-world impact and influence is demonstrable through evidence of adoption by policy makers, improvements in services and economic/ social/ cultural benefits in the public, private or third sectors. It will consolidate, harness and build upon existing DE knowledge and skills from DE Theme funding and related awards to help accelerate the research outcomes and outputs to the next stages of exploitation. It will support up to five
interdisciplinary and user-focused centres of excellence operating over a five-year period which draw substantially on the outputs, knowledge, positioning of DE expertise and demonstrations resulting from previous DE related funding. Each centre will be of a sufficient scope and size to achieve critical mass, thereby enabling it to attract additional requisite funding and support from partners and the host universities. It will develop committed routes for exploitation and will grow the pool of DE trained interdisciplinary researchers.

Aims of the centres

Each centre will be able to demonstrate a credible and core critical-mass DE portfolio (this will form part of the initial eligibility criteria) which will provide a platform to exert influence and attract partnership funding in order to exploit existing DE knowledge and skills to maximise impact and enable the next stage of impact to be achieved (please see next section for examples of how centres may achieve this.) The centres must draw substantially on the outputs of the portfolio of DE Theme funded research and skills sets that is being consolidated; taken forward and built upon by the Investigator(s) involved in each centre. Centres should have a clear interdisciplinary focus building upon the coherent and critical mass DE portfolio presented and areas of Investigator DE expertise involved.

The centre will need to demonstrate how it will mature and is able to optimise the funding provided through generating additional support and associated leveraging.

Activities supported in the centres

We would expect centres to support activities that maximise impact, grow the pool of DE trained interdisciplinary researchers and enable cross-centre working. Some suggestions for the form these activities could take are provided.

1. Activities to maximise impact could include:
   - applied and translational research that has clearly identified and engaged stakeholders (for challenge, evaluation, and possible adoption);
   - knowledge exchange and early stage ‘proof-of-concept’ activities that are essential to securing credible and engaged impact and commercial opportunities of all kinds. Where appropriate, it could help researchers to bridge the funding gap between traditional research grants and commercial funding and attempt to move the outcomes and outputs of this work to the next stage of impact. Activities will generally be considered ‘early stage’ where they are prior to a full laboratory demonstration of the idea, are pre-production and prototype and where commercial funds for development are not available;
   - ‘in the wild’ deployment and evaluation, to realise more effectively the impact of digital economy research. Consider potential risks associated with the project and options to mitigate this risk; activities could either cover the testing of new technologies and methods with potential beneficiaries or in the user(s) domain or looking at new ways of using existing technologies/methods.

Given the nature of the call, centres will not be expected to support the following:
• ‘Blue skies’ research i.e. curiosity driven research where the ‘real world’ applications, users and potential impacts are not immediately apparent;
• Applied research for private companies;
• Associated intellectual property costs e.g. patent costs.

As applied Digital Economy Theme work cuts across a wide range of sectors (e.g. energy, transport, healthcare, services, Government and the creative industries), each centre must therefore be interdisciplinary and have strong and significant partnerships with a range of commercial and public users, including the third sector. Centres may focus on the research challenges or be sector orientated but in all cases should aim to address the DE Theme’s core vision of supporting research to rapidly realise the transformational impact of digital technologies on aspects of community life, cultural experiences, future society, and the economy. **There will be an expectation that each centre will attract at least matched funding support (cash and in kind) from their partners and host university, and this will be a key consideration as part of the assessment criteria.**

2. Growing the pool of DE trained interdisciplinary researchers

The centres will grow and develop the pool of DE trained interdisciplinary researchers, for example transitioning more early career researchers into positions of academic and industry leadership and scaling up both economic and societal impact. These researchers will have embraced the DE mind-set and way of working across disciplines with co-creation of research with users.

The centres should be advocates for the approach and a testament to the fact that having an impact can be an integral part of world leading research. They should encompass aspects of showcasing, dissemination to a wider audience and public engagement – a generation of DE ambassadors and advocates should be encouraged.

The host universities will be expected to provide on-going people support (an example of such support may be in the form of transitional fellowships) to ensure that user-led interdisciplinary DE research continues and the DE culture is sustained within universities beyond the life of the centre.

3. Cross centre activities

Centres will be expected to develop the DE community and network across centres, share best practice, showcase/ disseminate outputs and engage with the Digital Catapult and other relevant organisations in a coordinated manner.

It is anticipated that centres will be hosted by a single organisation and may involve a number of organisations working in close collaboration (i.e. hub and spoke model). However applicants may wish to make the case for other models if this better suits their approach to deliver the centre. In all cases centres must consolidate and build upon on an existing (current or previously funded) DE Theme or closely related portfolio of research.
The outputs of this portfolio will form the basis for subsequent applied research, knowledge exchange and early stage feasibility/ commercialisation activities.

**Equipment**

Where possible, researchers are asked to make use of existing facilities and equipment, including those hosted at other universities. If equipment is needed as part of the research proposal, applicants must follow EPSRC’s rules for requesting equipment over £10,000 in value. Individual items of equipment up to the current OJEC (Official Journal of the European Communities) procurement threshold can be included on research proposals submitted through this call, but research organisations will be expected to make a contribution to the cost. All requests for single items of equipment above the current OJEC threshold will need to go through a separate process which will assess the strategic need for the equipment and how to ensure maximum usage. These proposals will be assessed through the separate Strategic Equipment peer review process.

For more information on equipment funding, please see: http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/research/ourportfolio/themes/researchinfrastructure/subthemes/equipment/.

The current OJEC threshold can be found at: http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/research/facilities/equipment/process/.

**Eligibility**

This call is being managed by EPSRC on behalf of the RCUK Digital Economy Theme, and the Research Councils involved – AHRC and ESRC.

For information on the eligibility of organisations and individuals to receive EPSRC funding, see the EPSRC Funding Guide: http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/howtoapply/fundingguide/

As this call is a targeted funding opportunity provided by EPSRC, higher education institutions, and some research council institutes and independent research organisations are eligible to apply dependent on meeting the ‘entry ticket’ eligibility requirement. A list of eligible organisations to apply to EPSRC is provided at: http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/funding/eligibilityforrcs/

**Call eligibility – assembling, consolidating and articulating a coherent and critical mass sized portfolio of DE Theme projects**

Proposals submitted to this call must draw substantially on the outputs of previous DE Theme and related funding. The applicant(s) must demonstrate that they have a substantial critical mass portfolio of current or previously funded DE Theme and related grant support and have used it to produce world-class research outputs and outcomes.

Prior to being invited to submit a full proposal, potential applicants will be required to demonstrate that they possess a valid ‘entry ticket’ to be eligible to apply against this call. The ‘entry ticket’ will be validated by the DE Theme on presentation of this information which will include details of the relevant DE Theme and related funding that assembled forms a substantial critical mass of coherent research and skills to build upon. **The DE grant portfolio list**
(detailing funding body, grant reference/ title, and value of DE relevant funding) should be accompanied by a coherence statement which sets out and justifies how this consolidated portfolio will enable the applicant(s) to deliver the overarching objective of this call as well as a summary statement of aims and future plans.

The portfolio can be constructed from consolidating a number of different DE Theme-funded and related grants and can be from more than one HEI partner. Where appropriate justification can be made, all DE Theme funding will be taken into account as well as any associated grants within the DE Theme from the AHRC and ESRC that have been considered to be aligned to the remit of DE Theme activities.

For reference purposes, a list of DE related funding will be made available on the call web page. Please note this list is purely indicative and not intended to be comprehensive or exclusive. If applicants feel they can justify the relevance of other funding to their DE portfolio then they are encouraged to make the case and justify this.

Critical mass value

The value threshold for demonstrating a critical mass portfolio of DE funding, must be greater than £2.4 million (M) 80% FEC (i.e. the Research Council contribution).

The DE Theme is not being prescriptive about how this threshold value is reached and consolidated. For example, consideration may not be based solely on the grant income record of the Principal Investigator holding the DE grant. Applicants may take a more holistic approach to consolidating their portfolio and articulate their reasoning as part of the coherence statement.

The specific criteria for validating the ‘entry ticket’ will be as follows:

- Presentation of DE grant portfolio list indicating sufficient critical mass and value of at least £2.4 million (M) 80% FEC;
- Supporting coherence statement (maximum of two sides) providing evidence of portfolio coherence, fit to DE remit and how the exploitation of this existing knowledge and skills will maximise impact and enable the next stage of impact to be achieved.

If any of these criteria are not met, then ‘entry ticket’ eligibility will be rejected.

Please email your ‘entry ticket’ submission to DigitalEconomy@epsrc.ac.uk as soon as possible for consideration.

Please note it is expected that the ‘entry ticket’ (coherence statement and details of the related DE grant portfolio list) will be submitted for consideration, discussed if necessary and confirmed by the DE Theme during the first month of the call going live. The longer it takes to provide this information and confirm eligibility, the less time applicants will have to prepare their full proposal for consideration. It is expected that ‘entry tickets’ will be received by 13 August 2014.

The onus is on applicants to make the case for their ‘entry tickets’ and it is anticipated that applicants will enter into a dialogue with the DE Theme if further clarification or iteration is required for ‘entry ticket’ validation. Please note
however that the final decision on ‘entry ticket’ eligibility will be made by the DE Theme and only invited applicants will be able to proceed to the full proposal stage.

Full Proposal Requirements
Once ‘entry ticket’ status has been approved and applicants have been invited to submit a full proposal, the critical mass value demonstrated for the ‘entry ticket’ does not need to correlate to the final size of the Centre bid. The threshold value of £2.4M however denotes the minimum 80% FEC value of centre to be requested as part of this call. Applicants may apply for up to £4M 80% FEC for their centre but please note the leveraging and matched funding requirements (based on the 100% FEC value of the centre) that need to be put in place and will form part of the assessment criteria.

Additional centre funding and leveraging
A compulsory feature of this call is that user partners (public, private or third sector) must be co-funding, and actively engaged in the co-creation of the research from the start of the project. The onus is on applicants to make the case to peer review that adequate leveraging and matched funding arrangements have been agreed. Ideally co-funding and leveraging will be in place up front but user partners can have flexibility to back load their commitment and support over the life of the centre. The host organisation(s) will also be expected to demonstrate substantial support for the centre through cash and/or in-kind contributions (please note 20% FEC contribution to any funded grant will not count towards the consideration of matched funding.) As stated previously leveraging and the matched-funding contributions from the host organisation(s) and other partners should be taken into account based on the 100% FEC value of the centre. This is designed to achieve a centre with a gross critical mass size and total worth of between £6M to £10M which is able to scale up the Next Stage activities from the existing DE-relevant activity.

Centre requirements
In summary, successful applicants must demonstrate:

1. **Critical mass, breadth and interdisciplinary nature of DE portfolio** – a valid ‘entry ticket’ and coherent critical mass portfolio drawing substantially and building upon existing (or recently completed) DE Theme funded and related research and skills (which may include studentships) consolidating a number of research strands cutting across key DE sectors, which can be taken forward to provide more impact and user engagement.

2. **How impact will be maximised through the centre’s specific project plans** – for example by addressing clearly defined research challenge(s), demonstrating how they have been co-created with the end-user(s), through undertaking research ‘in the wild’ and appropriate knowledge exchange and early stage ‘proof of concept’ activities.

3. **Leveraging and matched funding** – substantial support for the centre from university and user partners. Also collaboration and engagement with innovative businesses including SMEs.

4. **Strong people support** – Demonstrate that mechanisms are in place within the centre to grow and develop the pool of DE trained
interdisciplinary researchers including transitioning more early career people into academic and industry leadership posts, ensuring user led interdisciplinary DE research and culture is maintained beyond the life of the centre.

5. **Plans for cross centre activities** – developing the DE community and networking across centres, sharing best practice, showcasing/disseminating outputs, and future engagement with the Digital Catapult and other relevant organisations in a coordinated manner.

**Route to the Next Stage**

**Responsible Innovation, Societal Implications and Ethical Issues**

It is recognised that some areas of the Digital Economy have the potential to raise societal, ethical, philosophical, legal and regulatory issues and risks. Consideration of these issues is essential to ensure that the research carried out is considered within a societal context and that any such issues that are raised are fully explored as the research develops. For further information on responsible innovation and ethical requirements, applicants are referred to the following guidance documents:

http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/research/framework/

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/research-ethics.aspx

http://www.mrc.ac.uk/research/research-policy-ethics/
How to apply

Submitting application
You should prepare and submit your proposal using the Research Councils’ Joint electronic Submission (Je-S) System (https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk/).

When adding a new proposal, you should select:

- Council ‘EPSRC’;
- Document type ‘Standard Proposal’;
- Scheme ‘Standard’;
- On the Project Details page you should select the ‘Next Stage Digital Economy’ call.

Note that clicking ‘submit document’ on your proposal form in Je-S initially submits the proposal to your host organisation’s administration, not to EPSRC. Please allow sufficient time for your organisation’s submission process between submitting your proposal to them and the call closing date. EPSRC must receive your application by 16:00 on 09 October 2014.

Guidance on the types of support that may be sought and advice on the completion of the research proposal forms are given on the EPSRC website (http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/) which should be consulted when preparing all proposals.

Guidance on writing application
As well as the Je-S form, the following documents should be submitted:

- Case for Support: should be up to 12 pages in total, to include a two-page track record detailing the relevant expertise of each investigator(s) and main project partner(s) involved in the research project, and ten-page description of the proposed activities of the centre. This must include a description of:
  - how the centre will maximise impact through its activities; including the DE research challenge(s) being addressed, its specific context in the real world and how the research challenge has been co-created with the end-user(s);
  - the leveraging, matched funding and substantial support for the centre from both university and industrial partners;
  - the strong people support mechanisms in place to support the DE trained interdisciplinary researchers;
  - plans for developing the community and networking across the centres, sharing of best practice, showcasing/ disseminating outputs and future engagement with the Digital Catapult and other relevant organisations in a coordinated manner.

- Pathways to Impact document (up to 2 pages). This should include:
User Engagement Strategy - EPSRC now require all successful applicants to develop and execute a strategy for engaging with potential users of the research funded in the project (resources for this activity can be requested as part of the Pathways to Impact and must be justified in the application). This strategy should be reviewed and updated regularly as part of the formal management of the grant. The strategy should cover:

- how and when potential users have been / will be identified;
- what form the engagement will take;
- what steps will be taken to ensure that outputs of the research are made available to potential users;
- suitable metrics for determining the success of the strategy in delivering value to users.

Given the nature of the call, it is anticipated that this strategy will be developed implicitly as part of delivering the centre.

- details on methodologies and resources needed to involve end user(s) in the centre and research project;
- details on methodologies and resources required to realise the impact of the centre. This can include training for staff, professional services to visualise research outcomes, publicity, public engagement activities, social media. For more details please refer to the EPSRC website (http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/);
- details of how committed routes for exploitation will be developed.

- Justification of Resources (up to 2 pages);
- Host Organisation statement (up to 2 pages and to be uploaded as a ‘letter of support’ attachment type);
  - details on how the host organisation will be an engaged key partner providing substantial and dedicated support to the centre and its researchers.

- Diagrammatic Work Plan (1 page);
- Statements of Support from any Project Partners (no page limit).

For advice on writing proposals see: http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/howtoapply/preparing/

Any additional documentation provided will be discarded and not used in the assessment process.

Resources that can be requested under this call include:

- Investigator and researcher time;
- Travel and subsistence appropriate to delivery of the project;
• Costs associated with the practicalities of carrying out research in the wild;
• Equipment;
• Appropriate estates and indirect costs.

Resources to fund Project Partners are not allowable (this includes subcontracting to a Project partner).

Please note this call is being supported by Microsoft Research who will provide a process for applicants to request access and will make available to applicants on a case by case basis access to dedicated Cloud Computing resources according to the requirements of its Azure for Research programme: http://www.azure4research.com. Acceptance to this grant does not automatically enrol or accept applicants for Cloud Computing resources.

**Assessment**

**Assessment process**

In order to be invited to submit a full proposal, applicants will first need to have their 'entry ticket' eligibility validated by the DE Theme – this process may take up to a week. As previously mentioned it is an expectation that the 'entry ticket' (coherence statement and details of the related DE grant portfolio list) be presented, discussed if necessary and confirmed by the DE Theme during the first month of the call going live. The longer it takes to provide this information and confirm eligibility, the less time applicants will have to prepare their full proposal for consideration.

Assessment of full proposals will take the form of a 2 stage process: (1) postal peer review and (2) interview prioritisation panel.

**Stage 1: Postal peer review**

Proposals will be reviewed as per conventional peer review. If a proposal receives sufficiently supportive reviewers' comments they will go forward to stage 2 of the assessment process. Please note the DE Theme reserve the right to sift reject any full proposals that it deems not to have received sufficiently supportive reviewers’ comments at stage 1 and as such will not be competitive at stage 2 interview.

**Stage 2: Interview Panel**

If the reviews are sufficiently supportive, the proposal will go on to the interview stage and applicants will have the opportunity to respond to reviewers’ comments prior to interview.

Applicants and selected partners will be invited to interview by a specially convened prioritisation panel. Specific details and guidance for this process will be issued to invited applicants nearer the time. In summary the panel will interview all applicants, although the process will include the review and assessment of the the documentation, reviews and PI response, and subsequently the panel will prioritise full proposals against the call assessment criteria.
Assessment Criteria

Applicants will be assessed at interview and proposals reviewed and ranked according to the following assessment criteria:

- **Relevance to the objectives of the call, in particular;**
  - the centre consolidates an existing portfolio of DE research and skills into a critical mass and breadth of coherent and interdisciplinary DE related activity to take forward and build upon;
  - the centre undertakes activities designed to maximise impact and user engagement (for example demonstration of research challenge(s) being co-created by end-user(s)) and has specific project plans in place to deliver this;
  - degree of partnership support, leverage and matched funding;
  - people support mechanisms are in place to grow and develop the pool of interdisciplinary DE trained researchers ensuring the sustainability of user led interdisciplinary DE research and culture beyond the life of the centre;
  - developing the community and networking across the centres, sharing of best practice, showcasing and disseminating outputs, and plans for future engagement with the Digital Catapult and other relevant organisations in a coordinated manner.

- **Quality of research, including:**
  - Novelty, relationship to the context, and timeliness;
  - The ambition, adventure and transformative aspects identified;
  - Appropriateness of proposed methodology;
  - Joint intellectual challenge;
  - Synergy and added value of proposed research strands.

- **National importance including:**
  - Contributes to, or helps maintain the health of other disciplines contributes to addressing key UK societal challenges and/or contributes to future UK economic success and development of emerging industry(s);
  - Meets national needs by establishing/maintaining a unique world leading activity;
  - Complements other UK research already funded in the area, including any relationship to the EPSRC portfolio.

- **Potential research impact, including:**
  - Relevance and appropriateness of any beneficiaries or collaborators (e.g. upstream engagement/co-design);
• Plans for dissemination and knowledge exchange;
• Plans for promoting cross-disciplinary culture.

• **Ability of applicant team to deliver the research, including:**
  o Track record of the team, the leadership quality of the Principal Investigator;
  o Balance of skills of the project team and integration of different methodologies and approaches.

• **Resources and management, including:**
  o Effectiveness of planning and resource management strategy;
  o Appropriateness of resources requested.

Information about the EPSRC peer review process and guidance for reviewers can be found at: [http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/assessmentprocess/review/](http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/assessmentprocess/review/)

**Additional grant conditions**

Please note successful centres funded through this call will be monitored and assessed over the lifetime of their grant funding. Further details of the EPSRC mechanisms in place for review and continued support will be included in additional to the standard terms and conditions for grants.

**Key dates**

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<td>Call Launched</td>
<td>09 July 2014</td>
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<td>Expected ‘entry ticket’ submission by</td>
<td>13 August 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closing Date – Invited Full Proposals</td>
<td>09 October 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview Prioritisation Panel</td>
<td>February 2015</td>
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<td>Funding Decision</td>
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**Contacts**

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If you experience any problems submitting the proposal through Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) System please contact the Je-S System Helpdesk, JeSHelp@rcuk.ac.uk, 01793 444164.

We would also suggest applicants contact their University Research Office for advice and guidance on writing their proposals, and would remind applicants that clicking ‘submit document’ on your proposal form in Je-S initially submits the proposal to your host organisation’s administration, not to EPSRC. Please allow sufficient time for your organisation’s submission process between submitting your proposal to them and the call closing date.

**Change log**

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