



Blue Sky Proof-of-Concept Fund Further Particulars

Call for 6-month hypothesis-testing projects in neurotechnology

January 2026

V2

Please check the call website for any future updates.

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Introduction and scope

Cambridge NeuroWorks is proud to introduce the **Blue Sky Proof-of-Concept (PoC) fund**. This fund is designed to enable robust experimentation on adventurous, early-stage neurotechnology hypotheses across the UK. We embrace a **high-risk, high-impact** approach: projects may generate a proof-of-concept that moves an idea towards a feasible neurotechnology or – equally importantly - disprove a hypothesis enabling a pivot to a stronger concept.

By de-risking bold ideas, encouraging patient involvement and providing access to subject matter experts and the Cambridge NeuroWorks ecosystem, we seek to empower you to deliver transformative impact on some of the most pressing neurological conditions of our time.

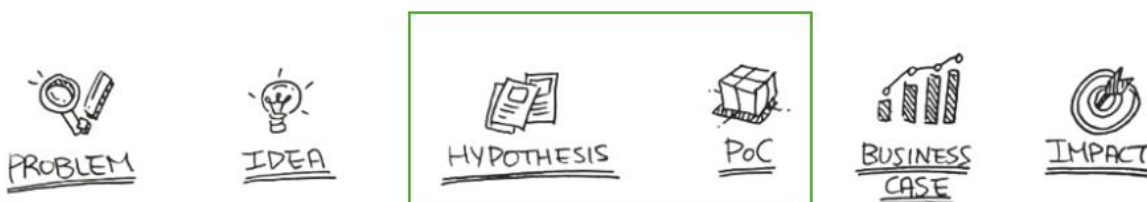
In scope:

Projects should meet the following criteria:

- Align with **ARIA's Scalable Neural Interface Opportunity Space**: <https://www.aria.org.uk/opportunity-spaces/scalable-neural-interfaces>
- Address a clinical need related to the nervous system, neurological or mental health
- Involve technologies that interact directly with the nervous system
- Demonstrate ambitious blue sky thinking: present a single high-risk, high-impact hypothesis, interrogation of which is unlikely to be funded through traditional grants
- Be deliverable within six months, providing a clear outcome on whether the PoC holds.

Out of scope:

- Addressing conditions not related to the scope of call (i.e. no clear clinical, or a problem that is not related to the nervous system)
- Technologies that do not interact with the nervous system, or approaches that rely solely on indirect interventions, purely environmental or behavioural strategies
- Expanding incrementally upon well-defined, proven concepts or existing intellectual property rather than testing a novel, unproven hypothesis
- Work that cannot realistically be completed within the given timeline or budget.



Who can apply

We welcome ambitious proposals from anyone with a bold and well-defined hypothesis that could revolutionise neurotechnology and improve patient outcomes.

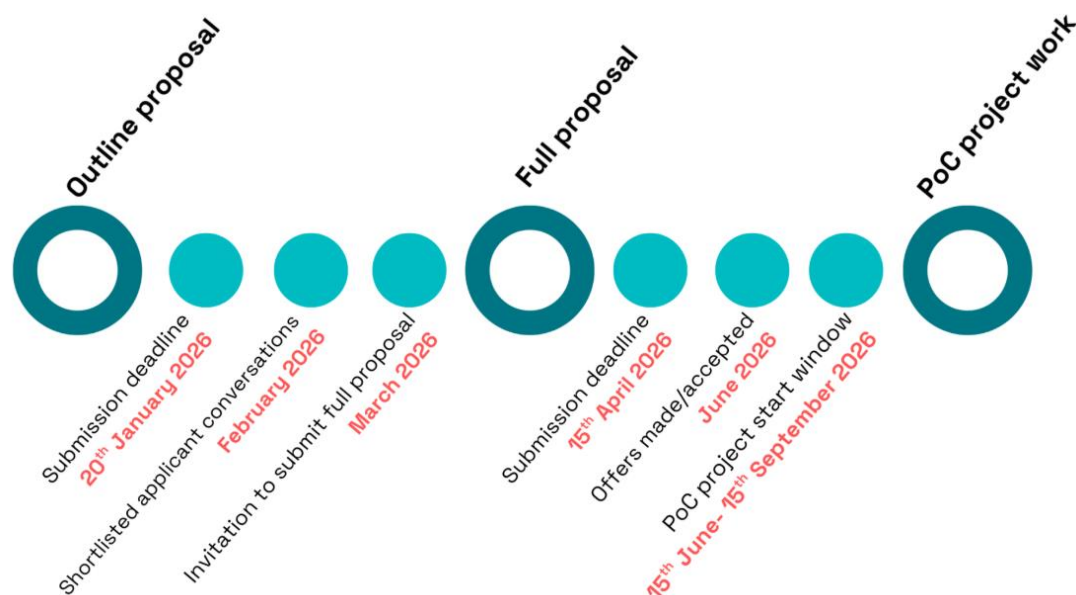
Applicants should demonstrate a deep understanding of the problem they aim to solve and clearly express the potential impact of their solution. We especially welcome proposals from individuals with relevant prior experience and/or those able to collaborate with academic experts to ensure the streamlined delivery of short intensive projects.

Please note that **all projects must be hosted and delivered through UK Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs)** to guarantee access to suitable existing research environments. If you are not currently a staff member, registered collaborator, or visitor, please engage with your chosen host HEI as early as possible to establish the necessary connection.

Applicants must hold the right to work in the UK for the entire duration of the project.

Call timelines

A summary of the indicative timeline of the PoC fund delivery is illustrated below:



PoC Project timelines

Intended duration of a PoC Project is 6 months. In exceptional circumstances, we may consider extended PoC Projects up to 9 months, provided a justification for requiring timeline flexibility (e.g. working on a part-time basis) is included at the full proposal stage.

PoC projects will be required to start between 15 June and 15 September 2026. All project work, including associated expenditure and reporting, must be completed by 31 March 2027.

Funding and support

We are committed to helping you make your PoC Project a success. Each successful proposal can receive up to £50,000, covering all eligible costs and applicable taxes. Funding will cover 100% of eligible expenditure, including directly allocated and directly incurred costs.

No expenditure can be incurred outside of the scope of ARIA's Eligible Expenditure Guide, <https://www.aria.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Eligible-Expenditure.pdf> with additional restrictions and clarifications applying to PoC fund as follows:

Eligible costs:

- research related expenses (including consumables, PPE, access to facilities and equipment, salaries, consultancy costs, relevant estates and technical support costs, and essential travel beyond regular commuting where required to carry out the work)
- visiting fees when hosted at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) and a visitor status is required for access to facilities.
- training fees (e.g., safety, inductions, equipment training) where required to carry out the work
- supervision provided by tenured HEI staff, if required (up to 10% of total project award).

Ineligible costs:

- travel to conferences, event fees, publication and patenting costs
- general courses and professional development training
- capital equipment valued at over £5,000 (excluding VAT), unless specifically agreed in the award letter
- membership fees
- accommodation and subsistence, except for limited travel between collaborators
- equipment maintenance, unless included in fixed shared equipment access charges
- general IT equipment.

NB: the PoC Eligible Costs Policy may be subject to change from time to time, which will be communicated in writing with award holders.

Alongside financial support, we will work with successful PoC Project leads to arrange and resource access to subject-matter experts and advisory support. Interactions with specialists from other fields can strengthen and accelerate project progress, help with derisking through robust interrogation, spark meaningful pivots and future cross-disciplinary collaborations.

Approach to intellectual property (IP)

Cambridge NeuroWorks follows ARIA's standard approach to intellectual property. Under this policy, creators generally retain ownership of any new intellectual property generated with their funding award. For further details, please refer to **Appendix 2** and the Award Letter terms.

The application process

Stage 1 – Outline Proposal

In the first stage of the application process you are invited to submit an outline proposal, by the 20 January 2026. We recommend submitting applications early to avoid potential technical issues and ensure your application is safely received ahead of the deadline.

To facilitate a blinded, unbiased review of ideas in separation from identifiable information about the applicants, the Outline Proposal submission consists of two components. Both parts must reach us before the deadline, and be linked to the same email address:

- **Part 1:** Complete a short online form collecting **identifiable information** required for call administration (see **Appendix 1** for what you will be asked to provide). The information from the online form will be kept separate from the outline proposal assessment. The link to the form is available from the call's website:
<https://cambridgeneuroworks.org/programmes/blue-sky-proof-of-concept-fund>
- **Part 2:** Email submission file (up to 1,200 words, PDF format is preferred) to CNW_PoC@maxwell.cam.ac.uk, containing your PoC Project **outline proposal**, including the PoC Project title and a summary addressing:
 - *The problem (unmet clinical need)* – What is the clinical challenge, and why are current solutions inadequate?
 - *Your ambition* – What is your proposed solution or innovation, and how will it address the unmet need? What is the potential scale of impact if your hypothesis proves correct?
 - *Your hypothesis* – Define the Proof-of-Concept you aim to test and deliver in this work? What scientific rationale or evidence is it based upon?
 - *Your approach* – What are the critical steps and experimentation methods required to prove or disprove your hypothesis?
 - *Success indicators* - How will you evaluate your final Proof-of-Concept? What are the success criteria and how do you propose to unlock next steps beyond this project?

Please see **Appendix 1** for further information.

Cambridge NeuroWorks reserves the right not to review submitted proposal files that:

- Exceed the 1,200-word-limit
- Contain identifiable information about the applicant or their affiliation
- Have file names or source email addresses that do not match the details submitted in the online application form
- Received after the deadline

A sift panel will score and rank outline proposals based on their ambition, quality, impact, and feasibility. Submissions considered outside the scope will be rejected by the sift panel.

Conversations with applicants

Stage 1 shortlisted applicants will be asked to take part in a brief recorded online conversation in February 2026 to further discuss their ideas for the PoC Project and answer a set of questions around ambition, impact, quality and feasibility of their proposed approach. The conversations will result in the finalized outline project shortlist.

Stage 2 – Full Proposal

Candidates successful at Stage 1 will be invited to submit a **full proposal** by 15 April 2026. This provides an opportunity to complement your outline proposal with additional details on how you will deliver the project.

As an early indication, you will be asked to add information regarding:

- *Budget* – a detailed breakdown of eligible costs and justification for expenditure.
- *Team* – information on the project team and roles (where applicable), and relevant expertise.
- *Milestones and Timelines* – a clear plan showing key activities and deliverables
- *Host institution* – confirmation that your project can be hosted by a UK higher education institution.
- *Additional info* – further details on methodology, required facilities, risk management, and anticipated outcomes.

The full proposals will undergo domain-expert review, to aid the section panel with project-specific advisory recommendations. The panel will assess and rank proposals based on ambition, quality, impact, and feasibility.

Comprehensive guidance will be provided directly to applicants when they progress to Stage 2.

Awarding

We will communicate funding decision in May 2026 and request swift acceptance confirmations from Project leads and host HEIs. The Award Letters (based on standard terms, see **Appendix 2**) must be signed by the end of June 2026 to enable timely start of the funded PoC projects.

Reporting

Project progress

We look forward to keeping open communication between Cambridge NeuroWorks and the PoC Project teams as required. At project mid-way point we will arrange a meeting/call to discuss progress against agreed milestones, pivots and any material decisions.

At the end of the project, you will be required to **submit a short final report** summarising:

- Key outcomes and deliverables:
 - Progress against project milestones. Has the concept been proven?
 - Experiments carried out to generate new knowledge, de-risk or disprove various aspects of the project hypothesis
 - Pivots and material decisions
- Insights gained during the project:
 - Evidence-based changing of project trajectory or discarding ideas
 - Potential for future development.

Financial reporting

Actual expenditure, recorded in an auditable way throughout the project by the PoC Recipient and claimed back by the PoC Recipient (the UK HEI hosting the project) from Cambridge as a one-off itemised invoice in line with the Funder's requirements, up to the amount awarded for the project. Exact details will be shared with the PoC Recipients ahead of contracting.

Celebrating success

Cambridge NeuroWorks is committed to celebrating and highlighting success of activities we have supported through case studies, testimonials and sharing successes of our community members through a range of communication channels we have. This can help you with increased visibility of capabilities, talent, emerging science and innovation. We would love to hear from you with updates about new connections, ideas or pivots you have developed, as well as about longer-term success beyond the PoC Project – translation, scale up, commercialisation and investment, clinical trials, follow-on awards, etc.

FAQs

Question	Answer
What is the deadline to submit the application for the Outline Proposal?	Applications are open until midnight on Tuesday 20 th 2026 (UK time).
Why is the PoC call structured in this way?	<p>We ask applicants only for the minimum effort required to enable us to take informed decisions at each stage of the application process. We begin with assessing the key hypothesis first, and will only ask for detailed plans, budgeting, etc. after shortlisting for best fit to this call.</p> <p>To ensure fairness and unbiased assessment of ideas, we separate identifiable personal data from the project descriptions during the outline phase.</p>
Does the 1,200-word limit for the outline proposal include references and/or figure captions, and is there a preferred referencing format?	Yes, the word limit includes all text in the proposal, including references and figure captions. We do not have a preferred referencing format.
Can I include images or figures in my outline proposal?	Yes, images and figures are welcome in the outline proposal if they help communicate your ideas. They should be used to enhance understanding, not as a substitute for text; in this regard, please note that the word limit includes figure captions (see above).
Given that the PoC projects must be hosted at a UK HEI, can an independent individual or a company apply?	Yes, individuals and affiliates of UK-registered companies can apply, but they must formalise their relationship with a host UK Higher Education Institution at the full proposal stage. NB: the grant funding will be held and managed through the host UK HEI.
What are applicants' anticipated roles in the delivery of the PoC project?	The team must include a "PoC Project PI" eligible to hold grants within the host UK HEI. You can act as the Project PI yourself, if eligible, or collaborate with a PI based at your

	<p>proposed host HEI. We anticipate that most applications will originate from one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic PI/co-I – who can oversee the project delivery (including team supervision, if relevant) and is eligible to hold funding awards at the proposed Host HEI • External PI/co-I – who can lead the project delivery, working in collaboration with someone eligible to hold funding awards at a UK HEI • Lead Researcher – who will deliver the project under supervision of a Project PI eligible to hold funding awards at the proposed Host HEI.
<p>Can the project involve collaborators or consultants?</p>	<p>Yes, but you must specify in your full proposal what work you intend for them to do, with any associated costs. NB: Any relationship management with additional collaborators is the responsibility of the PoC Project PI and their host HEI (PoC Recipient).</p>
<p>Do I need my proposed host institution's approval before applying?</p>	<p>Not at the outline proposal stage. A confirmation from a UK HEI indicating their willingness to host your PoC Project, if awarded, will be needed at the full proposal deadline (mid-April). Early engagement is strongly encouraged.</p>
<p>When do I need to provide details regarding project plan and finances?</p>	<p>At the full proposal stage, longlisted applicants will be asked for a detailed breakdown of eligible costs and justification the requested amount, up to a total of £50,000 per project. This should correlate with the proposed project plan.</p>
<p>Can the terms and conditions be negotiated?</p>	<p>No. The terms and conditions are fixed, issued in the form of a standard, non-negotiable Award Letter to the UK HEI.</p>
<p>When do contracts need to be signed?</p>	<p>We aim for a fast award process, with agreements signed within approximately four weeks. The contract (Award Letter issued to the PoC Project host HEI) must be signed on or before 30 June 2026.</p>

<p>Is it OK if the outcome of the project does not support my hypothesis, or if the project needs to pivot?</p>	<p>Absolutely. The fund embraces a "fail-fast" philosophy. Generating evidence that disproves assumptions, leads to a pivot, or produces new knowledge that changes the project trajectory is regarded as a successful outcome. We encourage adaptation based on evidence.</p>
<p>How will my project's progress be monitored?</p>	<p>The Innovation Pathway management team at Cambridge NeuroWorks will maintain regular contact with Project teams. Progress against milestones, pivots, and material decisions will be tracked.</p>
<p>Please can you provide more details on the award terms?</p>	<p>The award letter template, including the full terms and conditions, is available on our website for you or your potential host HEI to review.</p>
<p>Are estate costs eligible for funding under the Proof-of-Concept Fund?</p>	<p>Estates costs that form part of standard overheads (such as flat-rate general estate charges) are not eligible under the Proof-of-Concept Fund.</p> <p>However, estate-related charges that are directly and specifically required to deliver the project may be included. Examples include a visitor fee, access charges for a particular facility, or technical support where a defined number of technician hours is essential for the proposed work. Only these direct project costs should be included and will be requested at the full application stage.</p>
<p>Can I request a meeting or obtain feedback on whether my project aligns with the Fund's priorities?</p>	<p>To ensure a fair and unbiased assessment process, we do not offer individual meetings or provide tailored feedback on project ideas before submission. The scope criteria are outlined in this document.</p>
<p>Is the rental cost of equipment an eligible cost under the Proof-of-Concept Fund?</p>	<p>Yes, equipment rental costs are eligible when the equipment is directly required to deliver the proposed project activities.</p>
<p>Am I eligible to apply?</p>	<p>Please refer to the "who can apply" section of this document for full eligibility details.</p>

<p>How is the intellectual property handled when projects are delivered through UK Higher Educational Institutions?</p>	<p>Intellectual property (IP) arrangements follow the standard policies of the chosen host HEI and are formalised in the relevant visiting, collaboration, or staff agreement. Applicants may either follow the institution’s existing IP policy or negotiate specific terms directly with the HEI. The Fund’s IP position in relation to the host HEI is outlined in the template Award Letter available on the Cambridge NeuroWorks website.</p>
<p>Can I submit multiple applications?</p>	<p>Yes, you may submit multiple applications. Please complete a separate online application form for each submission and ensure that the Proof-of-Concept project title (see Appendix 1, question 10) matches the titles on the Outline Proposals you e-mail for each of them. Please note that only one project can be awarded per applicant.</p>

Appendix 1 – information required for your submission

Information you will need to complete the online application form accompanying the outline PoC Project proposal.

Cambridge NeuroWorks Proof-of-Concept Project outline application

Data protection

Cambridge NeuroWorks will process your personal data in accordance with UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For full details, see:

- **Cambridge NeuroWorks Privacy Policy:** <https://cambridgeneuroworks.org/legal/privacy>
- **ARIA's Privacy Policy:** <https://www.aria.org.uk/privacy-policy>

Queries & adjustments

For questions or to request reasonable adjustments, please e-mail CNW_PoC@maxwell.cam.ac.uk. This information will be treated confidentially and will not form part of the project assessment.

When you submit this form, it will not automatically collect your details like name and email address unless you provide it yourself.

* Required

Section 1: About 🔍

This section is for call administration purposes only and will not be taken into account during the assessment process.

1. I would describe myself as... * 🔍

(e.g., early-stage entrepreneur, established academic, serial innovator, amateur scientist)

Enter your answer

2. First name of lead applicant * 🔍

Enter your answer


3. Last name of lead applicant * 🔍

Enter your answer

4. Preferred contact email address * 🔍


Please provide one that can be used throughout the entire selection process

Enter your answer

5. Have you identified a UK higher education institution (HEI) best suited to host your proposed project? * 


Please refer to the call guidance: applications are open to all; however, successful proof-of-concept projects will be awarded for delivery through UK HEIs.

- Yes, and I am already affiliated with the identified HEI
- Yes, but the connection with the identified HEI has not yet been formalised
- No, an HEI has not yet been identified

6. If already known, which UK higher education institution (HEI) do you intend as the host for your proposed project? 


We are seeking the best alignment between the host HEI and the project and to support projects across the UK. The type or ranking of the host HEI will not be considered in the selection process.

Enter your answer


7. What is your anticipated role in the delivery of this project? * 

Shortlisted projects will be asked to provide additional information, including details of further team members or relevant collaborations at a later stage.

- Academic PI/co-I** - I will oversee the project delivery (including team supervision, if relevant). I am eligible to hold funding awards at the proposed Host HEI.
- External PI/co-I** - I will lead the project delivery in collaboration with someone eligible to hold funding awards at a UK HEI.
- Lead Researcher** - I will deliver the project under supervision of a Project PI eligible to hold funding awards at the proposed Host HEI.
- Other

8. Provide up to three keywords that best describe the clinical need you are addressing (e.g., disease or condition): * 

Enter your answer

9. Provide up to three keywords that best describe the approach of your proposed solution (e.g., technology or method): * 

Enter your answer

Next

Section 2: Outline Proposal



This section describes how to present your PoC hypothesis. If your application progresses, the outline proposal will form the basis of your full proposal. To avoid duplicating effort, you will only be asked to complement the outline with additional details on the project delivery in further stages of selection process.

Only the file with your outline proposal title and description will be shared with Cambridge NeuroWorks and external experts for review. The review process is blinded: proposals are assessed entirely independently of any applicant data, affiliations, or personal characteristics provided in this form. To maintain this independence and eliminate potential bias, please **do not include any identifiable information** in your project description. Your proposal should also be fully **non-confidential**.

In your response, please address the following points:

- **The problem (unmet clinical need)** – What is the clinical challenge, and why are current solutions inadequate?
- **Your ambition** – What is your proposed solution or innovation, and how will it address the unmet need? What is the potential scale of impact if your hypothesis proves correct?
- **Your hypothesis** – Define the Proof-of-Concept you aim to test and deliver in this work? What scientific rationale or evidence is it based upon?
- **Your approach** – What are the critical steps and experimentation methods required to prove or disprove your hypothesis?
- **Success indicators** - How will you evaluate your final Proof-of-Concept? What are the success criteria and how do you propose to unlock next steps beyond this project?

Project outlines will be scored and ranked on their ambition, quality, impact and feasibility.

10. Title of your Proof-of-Concept project *

Enter your answer

11. How will you submit your Proof-of-Concept project description? (maximum 1200 words) *

1) Submission method - Your proposal **must be sent from the email address provided above**. The call administrator will assign a unique ID matching this application form before sharing the outline proposal anonymously with reviewers.

2) File naming - The filename **must match your project title listed above** and not include any identifiable information about the applicant.

We reserve right not to review submitted proposal files that exceed the 1200 word-limit, contain identifiable information about the applicant or affiliation, have file titles or source email addresses that do not match the information submitted in this application form, or are received after the deadline.

- I will submit a PDF to CNW_PoC@maxwell.cam.ac.uk
- I will submit a Word file to CNW_PoC@maxwell.cam.ac.uk
- Other

Section 3: Submission agreement



12. By submitting this application:

- I confirm I intend to send the outline PoC Project proposal file by email.
- I agree to my proposal being shared for review with Cambridge NeuroWorks and external experts and for my information to be handled in line with the Privacy Policies of ARIA and Cambridge NeuroWorks.
- I understand that I will be separately invited to complete an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) monitoring form, and that my EDI response will not be used in the selection process.
- I confirm that I have not included any confidential information nor unprotected intellectual property (IP) in this form or in the proposal file.
- I confirm that I have not included any identifiable information about myself/my affiliation within the outline project proposal to enable a fully blind review.
- I agree to participate in an online conversation about my proposal if invited to the next stage.
- I confirm I understand that all projects funded under this scheme will be required to be hosted by a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI), and that I am therefore encouraged to engage early with my proposed host HEI to make them aware of this scheme with sufficient notice.
- If I am invited to submit a full proposal, I agree to work with my proposed host UK HEI to establish a relevant form of affiliation, and to source a confirmation of their willingness to host the project based on the standard Award Letter terms. (*UK HEI willingness to host should be acknowledged by mid-April 2026, with a potential project funding award subject to contract execution in June*).
- I confirm I understand that I will need to hold Right to Work in the UK for the full duration of the project, and may be asked to provide evidence of it.
- I confirm I understand that this submission does not guarantee funding or progression to the next stage.
- I understand that information in Section 1 will be used for administration of the call and will not affect shortlisting outcomes. All data will be handled securely, and retained for the minimum period necessary. I can request access, correction, or deletion of my data by contacting CNW_PoC@maxwell.cam.ac.uk (which may result in my application withdrawal from this scheme).

*

- I confirm that I have read the above statements, and I wish to proceed with the submission of my PoC project outline proposal on these terms.

Appendix 2 – Standard terms of the PoC Award Letter

Prospective host HEIs and PoC applicants are invited to review the templated PoC Project Award Letter, specifying the terms and conditions for the scheme. It will be made available through the call website by mid-December 2025.

Key points PoC applicants should raise with their intended host HEI

- All PoC Projects awards must be delivered through a UK HEIs as host (referred to as the “PoC Recipient” organisations).
- **Terms of the PoC Project funding awards are standardised and non-negotiable.** They are based on the Brunswick Group collaboration agreements, widely accepted by the UK HEIs. The terms were designed to enable effective delivery of these short, small-scale projects, while minimising administrative overhead on all involved.
- Timeline for HEI decision-making on PoC Project hosting includes:
 - indicative willingness to host the PoC Project to stated be by the invited Full Proposals deadline (mid-April 2026).
 - If a PoC project proposal receives the funding from this call, the hosting HEI will be expected to sign the standardised Award Letter by the end of June 2026.
 - All PoC Project researchers must establish and formalise relationships, such as establishing a visiting agreement, with the host institution before the project start date.
- PoC applicants are expected to engage with their intended host UK HEI very early on – to understand, and align with, relevant local processes and requirements. This includes agreeing relevant hosting arrangements and naming authorised contact person(s) to interface with for administrative and contracting purposes at the later stages of the call - - this would normally be Head of Department and/or HEI's research funding office.
- The Project’s Principal Investigator (PI) must be deemed by the host HEI as eligible to hold grant funding. They may also need be eligible to supervise researchers and/or host visitors if required by the project. If the PoC applicant is not eligible to act as the Project PI in the delivery phase, the PoC project may proceed in collaboration with a local Academic PI who can act as the local Project PI.