

## **Equality Impact Assessment – Digital Society Network Plus 2021**

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is committed to promoting equality and participation in all its activities, whether this is related to the work we do with our external stakeholders or whether this is related to our responsibilities as an employer. As a public body, we are also required to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations when making decisions and developing policies. To do this, it is necessary to understand the potential impacts of the range of internal and external activities on different groups of people.

What is an Equality Impact Assessment and why does UKRI use it?

When developing a new scheme, or considering changes to an existing one, UKRI will carry out an equality impact assessment to review how it may affect particular groups or individuals and will take the findings into account. We expect that very rarely our actions will create barriers to participation. The assessment may however flag issues that are not of UKRI's making but we will, where it is in our remit to do so, recommend actions and adjustments. Some impacts are not exclusive to the scheme or change that is being evaluated and need to be addressed throughout our organisation. In some cases we may not have enough expertise and we will consult with others.

Our leadership and building on good practice

It is our ambition to be recognised as a leader in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and to build on our record of achievements to date, following on from the RCUK, Innovate UK and HEFCE Action Plans. These Plans are updated from time to time and Equality Impact Assessments will help us to prioritise actions.

Current good practice that is relevant to the Digital Society Network Plus 2021 call includes our:

- Grant terms and conditions, including recognition for sick leave and all forms of parental leave
- EDI in Panel Meetings Guidance for all panel members.

There are multiple dimensions/aspects to this Equality Impact Assessment:

- 1) Ensuring that the eligibility criteria are clear and objectively justified
- 2) Ensuring that the submission, peer review and awarding processes are free from unintentional bias
- 3) The identification of any potential barriers to attendance and participation in the call and the assessment and awarding process as below
  - a. Meeting duration – Appropriate duration to facilitate good environmental conditions for assessment and inclusion
  - b. Venue location and arrangements to accommodate needs
  - c. Broad ranging panel membership

d. Meeting management/Chair/robust assessment criteria

Question	Response
<p><b>1. Name of policy/funding activity/event being assessed</b></p>	<p>Digital Society Network Plus 2021</p>
<p><b>2. Summary of aims and objectives of the policy/funding activity/event</b></p>	<p>This funding opportunity is part of the ESRC's Living With Technology strategic priority. ESRC is pleased to invite applications for the Digital Society Network Plus Call 2021.</p> <p>The Network Plus should develop a research agenda that explores society's relationship with technology and how technologies influence society's relationships.</p> <p>The Network Plus will facilitate partnerships between researchers, policymakers and practitioners, allowing for integrated, cross-cutting and interdisciplinary activities. It will directly fund research projects and support individuals that cross disciplinary boundaries via a commissioning fund. It should provide leadership development opportunities for early career researchers from a diverse range of backgrounds and sectors.</p> <p>The term Digital Society is used to capture changes occurring because of and alongside increasing digitisation, and because more types of social, political and cultural processes occur through and with digital services. Digital refers to the technological mediating environment that is the context for changes already underway in society. As such, the Network Plus is not restricted only to focusing upon digital technologies.</p> <p>We recognise that the scope of potential research is very broad, however, we expect the Network Plus to catalyse change by bringing new people together to co-create new ideas and by developing a conceptual research agenda. The Network Plus will not be able to consider all the research challenges, but it will enable a step change by addressing the desired outcomes of the investment published in our Funding Finder for the call.</p>
<p><b>3. What involvement and consultation has been done in relation to this policy? (e.g. with relevant groups and stakeholders)</b></p>	<p>The ESRC, as part of UK Research and Innovation, will fund a major investment to support world-leading interdisciplinary research portfolio that will directly inform our understanding of the relationship between society and technologies.</p>

	<p>ESRC hired a consultant, Prof Gina Neff from the Oxford Internet Institute, to run a consultation about Digital Society research needs and how to engage a diverse group of academics, third sector and policy makers in this area.</p> <p>Various academic and non-academic experts were consulted, including UKRI staff, academics, and existing investments within this portfolio. The exercise informed the design of the call, as well as other internal scoping work.</p> <p>We also viewed other EDI's to ensure ours was consistent with policies used on other calls and spoke to colleagues who have run successful and inclusive programmes.</p> <p>In addition, we consulted the EDI group to ensure our assessment was rigorous and thorough.</p>
<p><b>4. Who is affected by the policy/funding activity/event?</b></p>	<p>Applicants to the Digital Society Network Plus 2021 Call.</p> <p>Existing grant holders within ESRC's technology portfolio.</p> <p>Commissioning Panel Members for the Digital Society Network Plus 2021 Call.</p> <p>Specialist Reviewers selected to look at the Digital Society Network Plus 2021 applications.</p> <p>ESRC staff working on and attending meetings for Digital Society Network Plus 2021</p>
<p><b>5. What are the arrangements for monitoring and reviewing the actual impact of the policy/funding activity/event?</b></p>	<p>EDI characteristics among successful/unsuccessful applicants will be assessed as part of the review process at the end of the call.</p> <p>In addition, EDI considerations will be included in the feedback form for panel members after the meeting.</p>

## GENERAL EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY CONSIDERATIONS

ESRC's research commissioning processes are designed with fairness in mind.

### Eligibility and criteria

- The Digital Society Network Plus 2021 is open to all eligible research organisations (RO). Applicants are eligible for funding whether or not they are established members of a recognised RO, but applicants who are not an established member of

a recognised RO must be accommodated by the RO and provided with appropriate facilities to carry out the research.

- Include if appropriate:  
Track record is not a funding criterion for the scheme, however call criteria sets out desires for an experienced team capable of managing complicated activities. Whilst track record may play into panel decisions it should not be emphasised to the extent that innovative / potentially high impact work by less established researchers is disadvantaged. Panels are instructed to assess the application in front of them and not to 'read between the lines' or give the benefit of the doubt based on the reputation of the individual applicant or team, as this would be a form of confirmation bias.

### **Standard Grant Terms and Conditions:**

- UKRI standard Grant Terms and Conditions comply with UK equality legislation and include provisions designed to mitigate against potential negative impacts (e.g. sick pay, parental and adoption leave, the possibility of part-time and flexible working, and grant extensions).
- Research Organisations are subject to equality legislation and have a duty to comply with it. RGC 8 states that 'The Research Organisation must assume full responsibility for staff funded from the grant and, in consequence, accept all duties owed to and responsibilities for these staff, including, without limitation, their terms and conditions of employment and their training and supervision, arising from the employer/employee relationship.' Universities are therefore required to make reasonable adjustments as required to support their staff.

### **Panel recruitment:**

- We will aim to ensure that the composition of the commissioning panel is diverse, with at least a 60:40 gender balance.
- We will ensure (if possible) that the chair and vice chair of the commissioning panel are not the same gender.
- Whilst panel members are appointed, first and foremost, based on expertise, we will aim to appoint a diverse panel membership. Final decisions take into account trying to balance the panels by gender and geography and seek to ensure a diversity of career stage and institutions. We will only make recruitment decisions which compromise diversity when it is objectively justified by the necessity to ensure the required breadth of subject expertise with high quality candidates.
- A tool has been developed which allows ESRC staff to assess the EDI characteristics of commissioning panels, and this will be used when appointing panels.

### **Process**

- Peer reviewers are required to evidence their views and scores. ESRC staff conduct usability checks on all peer review comments and where there is evidence of bias or a reviewer has failed to provide evidence for their scores the review will be marked as 'unusable'.
- All panel members will receive guidance which covers issues including fairness, objectivity and unconscious bias.
- It is the role of panel members to moderate and assess the quality of peer review and to agree final scores for each proposal. Panel members will be briefed on unconscious bias and encouraged to feel empowered to constructively challenge

potential bias where they identify it. The Panel Chairs and Panel Secretaries play a particularly important role in this respect. An implementation intention statement will be read out at the beginning of the commissioning panel meeting which sets the tone for discussions and requires that panel members pay close attention to the scoring criteria and definitions.

Protected Characteristic Group	Is there a potential for positive or negative impact?	Please explain and give examples of any evidence/data used	Action to address negative impact (e.g. adjustment to the policy)
<p><b>Disability (both mental and physical)</b></p>	<p>Potential negative</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>Je-S does not currently comply with disability accessibility schemes. This will be picked up by The Funding Service.</p> <p>Applicants should seek support from their own institution's research support office.</p> <p>Panel meeting attendees with physical disabilities may have difficulties if meeting venues cannot cater for their needs.</p> <p>Panel meeting attendees with neuro-disabilities may experience difficulties with concentration and</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>Solicit information from panel meeting participants (in confidence) about any additional requirements they may have to fully participate.</p> <p>Ensure that venues offer an accessible and inclusive environment for participants. Depending on the needs identified, considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessibility for wheelchair users and people with impaired mobility;</li> <li>• Induction loops for the hearing impaired;</li> <li>• If the meeting is taking place on an online platform, then closed captions will be used for the hearing impaired</li> <li>• Adequate lighting, alternative document formatting and potential use of screen readers for the visually impaired;</li> <li>• Dietary restrictions for those with coeliac, diabetes etc.</li> </ul>

		<p>focus during panel assessments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of documents in sans-serif, dyslexia-friendly fonts; and dyslexia-friendly formats;</li> <li>• Avoiding colours, lighting etc that may trigger migraines, epilepsy;</li> <li>• Ensuring that plenty of breaks are built into the agenda;</li> <li>• Ensuring sufficiently bright and spacious rooms;</li> <li>• Ensure that venues are easily accessible to main transport links.</li> <li>• Consider paying T&amp;S for carers or support workers to attend alongside the participant on a case by case basis, where this is required and not covered by the Individual's own employment contract.</li> <li>• Where there are particular constraints consider opportunities for participants to engage in a different way (via video-link, tele-conference for instance).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Gender reassignment</b></p>	<p>Potential negative</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>Trans people may be absent from work as a consequence of transition and UKRI records may show the wrong gender.</p> <p>Attendees may feel unwelcome or uncomfortable if there are not</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>UKRI terms and conditions are flexible in nature and absence as a result of medical treatment. We would expect that absence related to transition would be covered by the Research Organisation's sick policy and strongly encourage ROs to treat absence relating to transition like any other sick absence.</p> <p>Consideration needs to be given at UKRI level as to how records (including Gateway to Research</p>

		appropriate accessible/unisex bathrooms available.	and other communications materials) might be adjusted.  The provision of unisex bathrooms at future meetings.
<b>Marriage or civil partnership</b>	Probably not.	This is unlikely to have an effect on the inclusion of those who are married or in civil partnerships.	
<b>Pregnancy and maternity</b>	Potential negative	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>There may be venue issues for new mothers – i.e. no place for breastfeeding particularly if it is an all-day event.</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>Provision for parental leave (including maternity leave, paternity leave and leave related to surrogacy and adoption) are covered in the UKRI terms and conditions.</p> <p>We should ensure the use of gender neutral language – parental leave, irrespective of sexual orientation.</p> <p>The costs of additional childcare for grant-holders, beyond that required to meet the normal contracted requirements of the job, and that are directly related to the project, may be requested as a directly incurred cost if the institutional policy is to reimburse them. However, childcare costs associated with normal working patterns may not be sought.</p> <p>Consider whether the venue for the commissioning panel meeting is able to provide facilities for breastfeeding/expressing mothers if necessary. If the meeting takes place using an online platform, then adequate breaks that support breastfeeding/expressing mothers will be provided.</p>

			Reimbursement of additional childcare costs if the meeting participant is otherwise unable to attend (this could include childcare at the venue, additional hours of childcare in the child's usual setting or paying for a relative to travel to care for school age children).
<b>Race (including ethnicity)</b>	Potential negative	<p>See above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>There may be potential for bullying and harassment to occur during the event, particularly if more interactive breakout sessions are included.</p>	See above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations (particularly in relation to panel composition and mitigations against unconscious bias).
<b>Religion or belief</b>	Potential negative	<p>See above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>There could be potential discrimination because it is known that somebody (either a panel member, a research applicant or research participants) has a particular faith or belief.</p> <p>If the event is all day this may discourage those from religions which require them to pray throughout day to attend.</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations (particularly in relation to panel composition and mitigations against unconscious bias)</p> <p>Ensure that religious observances are considered when planning panel meetings. Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scheduling meetings to avoid major religious festivals; (if impossible to avoid then consider mitigations – ie. during Ramadan ensuring that meetings finish early so that participants are able to get home to break their fast, awareness of the sensitivities around offering Muslims meals during periods of fasting);</li> <li>• Accommodating dietary restrictions (ensuring that</li> </ul>

		<p>Food at the event may not be appropriate for the dietary requirements some religions have – e.g. halal, beef.</p>	<p>there is sufficient choice to allow all participants to eat – recognising that some groups cannot eat pork or beef or shellfish, that others avoid caffeine, ensuring that vegetarian food is available if Kosher or Halal food is not provided) etc.;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not scheduling meetings such that they would require travel late on Friday evenings (Jewish Sabbath) or on Fridays (Friday prayer, Islam)</li> <li>• Allowing prayer breaks if requested</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual orientation</b>	<p>Potential negative, although few opportunities for participants to disclose their sexual orientation.</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>There may be potential for bullying and harassment to occur during the event, particularly if more interactive breakout sessions are included.</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p>
<b>Sex (gender)</b>	<p>Potential negative</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>Use of language can present a barrier to participation and it may be perceived that those with caring responsibilities are disadvantaged.</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>Ensure use of gender-neutral language in call specification, guidance, etc.</p> <p>Ensure that the panel has balanced gender representation (aim for at worst 60:40 split)</p> <p>Ensure that the meeting location is suitable to allow easy return home</p>

		Panel members may be disadvantaged and unable to attend meetings if they have caring responsibilities.	Reimbursement of additional childcare costs if the meeting participant is otherwise unable to attend (this could include childcare at the venue, additional hours of childcare in the child's usual setting or paying for a relative to travel to care for school age children)
<b>Age</b>	Potential negative or positive depending on scheme eligibility requirements	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>Early career researchers* may be disadvantaged as they don't have the same track record to draw on as an experienced researcher.</p> <p>(*It is assumed that early career researchers are generally younger than their more experienced peers, although this by no means always the case. This is why this point has been included under 'age').</p>	<p>Also see above, under General Equality and Diversity Considerations.</p> <p>Track record is not an explicit criterion, given likely relationship to career stage and hence (indirectly) age. Panel members are briefed to make clear that they should be assessing the application in front of them and not reading between the lines. They should assess an individual's capability to deliver their proposed research.</p> <p>Use of a variety of different communication strategies including social media to ensure that our messages reach the widest possible target audience.</p>
<b>Other characteristics not protected under the Equality Act</b>	Potential negative. ESRC is committed to go above and beyond bare compliance with Equalities legislation to ensure that our processes are as fair and		ROs need to be clear of their responsibilities. The Research funding guide states: 'The Research Organisation is responsible for compliance with the terms of the Equality Act 2010 including any subsequent amendments introduced while work is in progress; and for ensuring that the expectations set out in the RCUK statement of expectations for equality and diversity are met'.

	<p>equitable as they can be. For instance, we wish to ensure that potential applicants and stakeholders are not disadvantaged by geography, institutional status etc.</p>	<p>Call specifications should draw attention to ESRC's aspirations around ED&amp;I. Applicants should be alerted to the fact that if they wish to participate in an ESRC-led activity but find that they are barred from doing so as a consequence of ED&amp;I considerations they should contact the office for advice.</p> <p>We work to ensure that panels are balanced as far as possible (within the constraints of quality and appropriateness) across the range of protected characteristics, and across broader characteristics including participation from post-1992 and Russell Group institutions, ensuring that we have a good geographical spread of panel members across the four nations of the UK, and across a diversity of career stages and paths.</p>
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**Evaluation:**

Question	Explanation / justification	
Is it possible the proposed policy or activity or change in policy or activity could discriminate or unfairly disadvantage people?	<p>Yes – there are a variety of risks of organising a call and associated events which can unfairly disadvantage certain groups including access barriers (ie venue and timing of the event) and physical and social barriers to proactive participation during the event.</p> <p>See the potential negative impacts outlined above.</p>	
Final Decision:	Tick the relevant box	Include any explanation / justification required
1. No barriers identified, therefore activity will <b>proceed</b> .		
2. You can decide to <b>stop</b> the policy or practice at some point because the data shows bias towards one or more groups		

3. You can <b>adapt or change</b> the policy in a way which you think will eliminate the bias	✓	See the mitigations outlined above.
4. Barriers and impact identified, however having considered all available options carefully, there appear to be no other proportionate ways to achieve the aim of the policy or practice (e.g. in extreme cases or where positive action is taken). Therefore you are going to <b>proceed with caution</b> with this policy or practice knowing that it may favour some people less than others, providing justification for this decision.		

<b>Will this EIA be published* Yes/Not required</b> (*EIA's should be published alongside relevant funding activities e.g. calls and events:	Yes
<b>Date completed:</b>	01.10.2021
<b>Review date</b> (if applicable):	Re-evaluate yearly if needed, due to different stages of the Digital Society Network Plus Programme.