

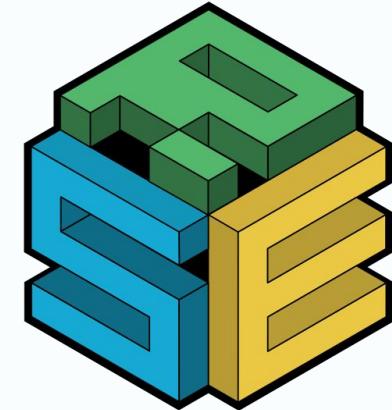


University of  
**Sheffield**

# Running a local RSE call for proposals

RSECon25, September 2025

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RSE team, University of Sheffield



# Who are we?



The RSE team at Sheffield was created in 2016 by two EPSRC fellows (Paul Richmond & Mike Croucher) in Computer Science.

→ 13 RSEs all on permanent research contracts

The team is now underwritten by the *School of Computer Science, IT services and the School of Mathematical and Physical Sciences*

We are working closely with another team at the University:  
The Data Analytics Service [DAS], hosted in IT services.

⇒ 9 Team members, all on permanent PS contracts



# Communication in academia...is hard!

Reaching researchers across the University is not easy!

Some are getting to us via our trainings\*, code clinics or by word of mouth...But still a lot of them do not know we exist...



\*(see FAIR24RS poster by T. James)

# How do we reach out? What could attract people?

What do researchers need? [based on my own experience when I was one]:

- **Grant Money** → We cannot give money out!
- **Citations** → We are helping them to get more robust software that should help with this...
- **Time!** → This we can provide! We have 1FTE of work available (fully underwritten)

# We need to all speak the same language...

But How, in practice, to reach out in a way that actually talk to them?

⇒ Researchers are constantly looking for new opportunities to make progress on their research...This often translate to applying to various calls (for money/computing time/etc...)!

⇒ Let's add a RSE call in the mix!

# Target audience & projects:

- Any research active staff, including PDRAs, and PhD students, affiliated to the University can apply.
- Projects must involve significant software development that would benefit from RSE expertise.
- Preference may be given to projects with potential high impact or those addressing pressing scientific challenges.



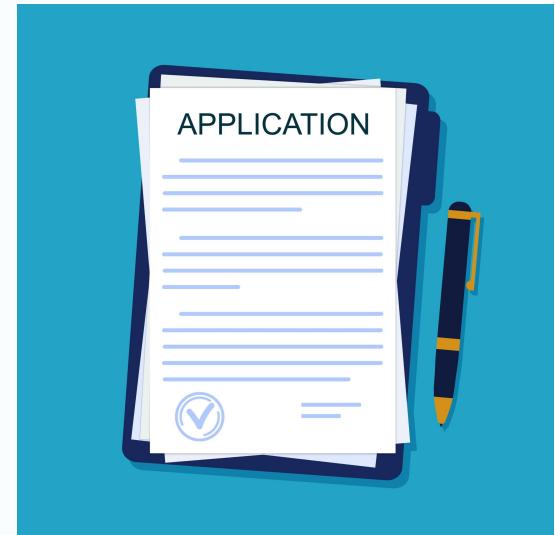
# Expectation?

- The team **selects two/three projects**.
- Selected proposals will receive **6 months @ 45-50%** FTE with an RSE on their project.
- The start date will be decided by the RSE team based on the project timeline and team members availability.
- The duration of the project will **not exceed 6 months** but might be shortened with a higher FTE fraction (e.g. 3 months @ 100%).
- The **collaboration will be continuous** and can not be split into multiple shorter, disjointed periods of time.

# Application: Let's keep it painless

Everything is made on a google form:

- **Abstract:** Provide a brief description of project + role of software
- **RSE objectives:** Outline the specific areas where RSE expertise is needed,
- **Expected outcome:** What does a successful collaboration look like?
- **Project risks:** What issues may cause the collaboration to be unsuccessful?
- **Impact statement:** Explain how access to RSE skills contribute to the project success or broader research goals.
- **Existing material:** Briefly explain what existing material you already have.
- **Preferred timeline:** what would be the ideal time distribution of the RSE.



# Selection:

- **Fit:** Request fits the objective of the call.
- **Skills:** Does the RSE team have the required skills? Are these skills available for the duration of the project?
- **Impact:** Potential Impact of the RSE work [For the project, and wider for the community.]
- **Practicality:** How easy will it be for the RSE to join the project?
- **Resource efficiency:** Is the work requested achievable in the offered time?

⇒ Shortlist of 5/6 projects



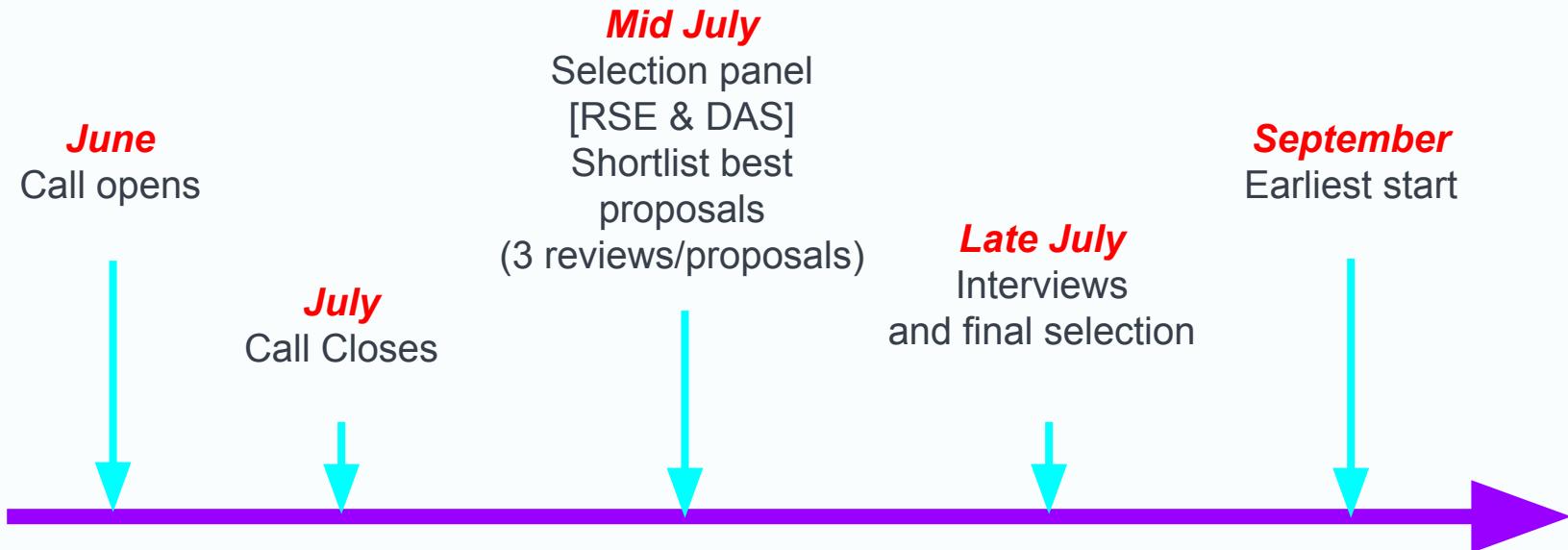
# Interviews

The Primary Investigator and eventually some co-I, are invited to attend a short interview with three members of our teams. The purpose of the interview is to:

- Share with the panel the current state of the software, **demonstrate how it is currently used,**
- **Clarify** some parts of the project, if needed,
- **Discuss the expected goals** of RSE involvement and the impact it will have on the software and its users, both within the research group and beyond,
- **Consider any risks** associated with undertaking the work.

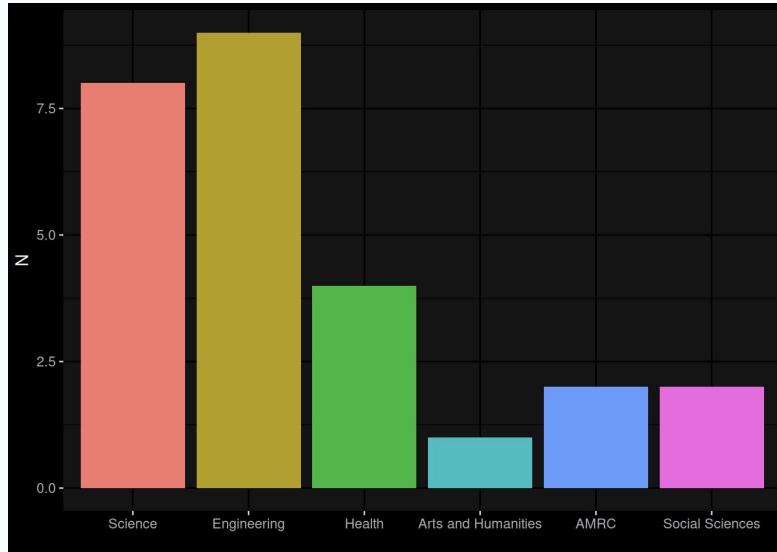


# Call for Proposal Timeline

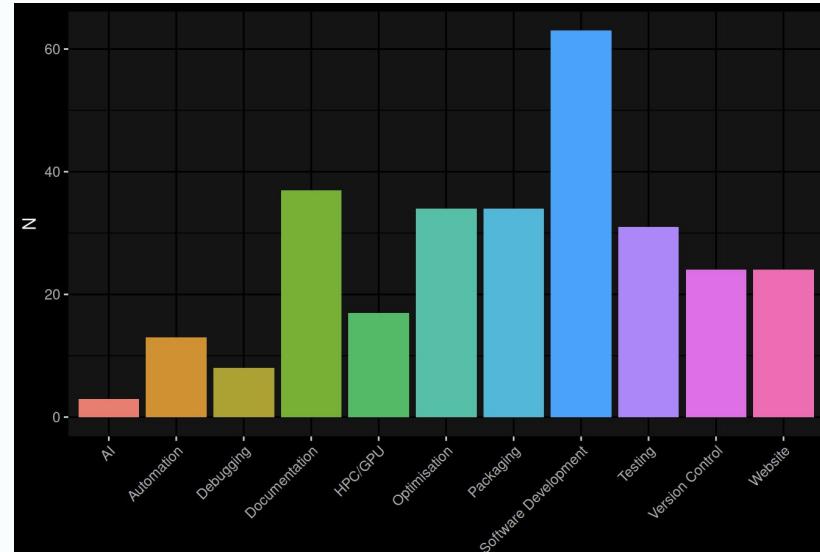


# How did that go?

Call for proposal 2024 (1st)



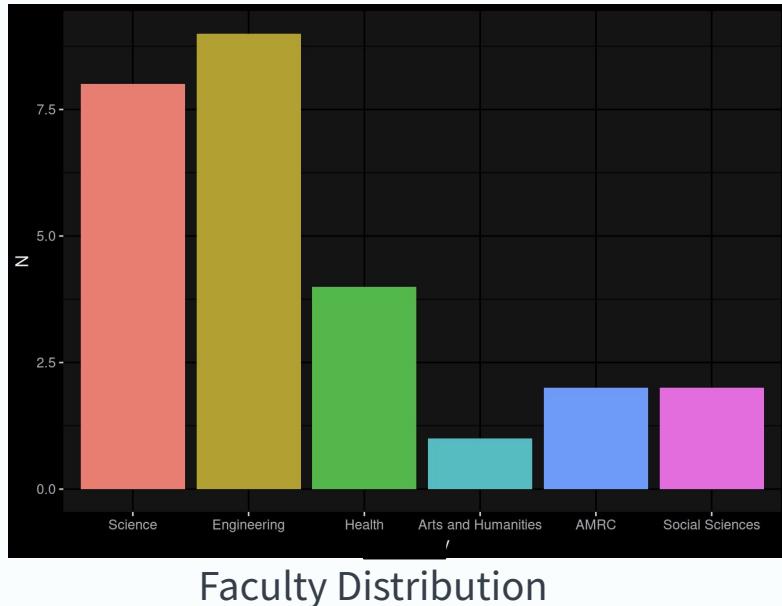
Faculty Distribution



Software domain distribution  
(Reviewer classification)

# How did that go?

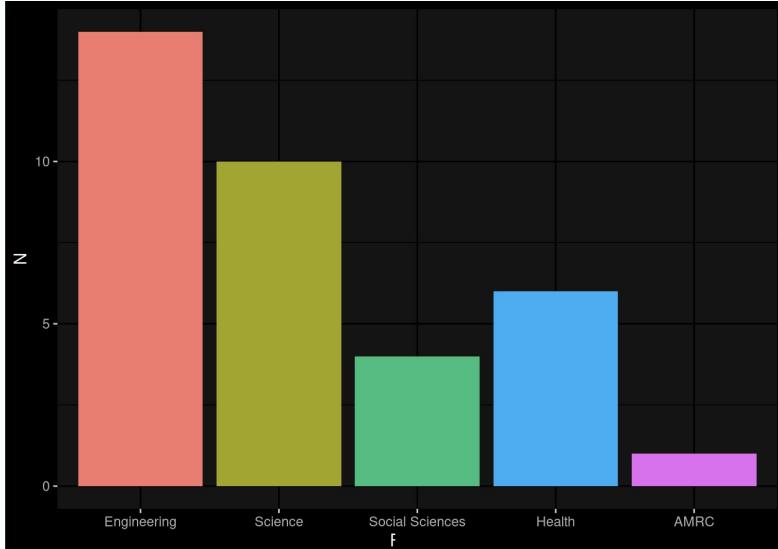
Call for proposal 2024 (1st)



**26 proposals received!**

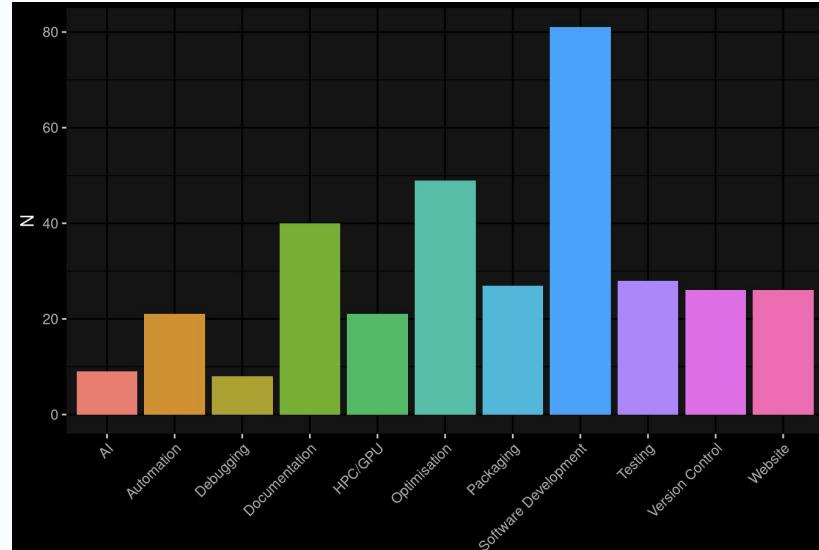
- Call leader: Neil Shephard
- 10 reviewers (RSE & DAS)
- From 6 Faculties
- 3 new collaborations started
  - Civil Engineering → GPU / C++
  - Archeology → General RSE dev / Python
  - BioScience → General RSE dev / Python

# How did that go?



Faculty Distribution

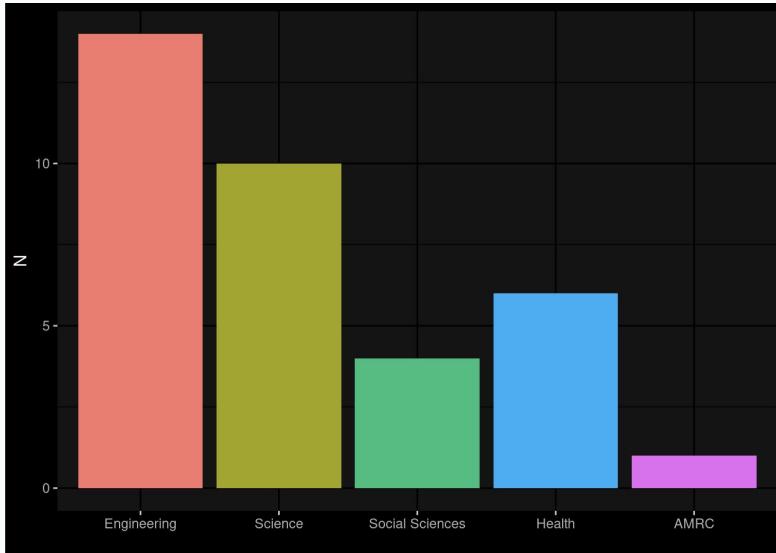
# Call for proposal 2025 (2nd)



Software domain distribution  
(Reviewer classification)

# How did that go?

## Call for proposal 2025 (2nd)



Faculty Distribution

**35 proposals received! [+9!]**

- Call leader: Neil Shephard
- 9 reviewers (RSE & DAS)
- Applications from 5 Faculties
- 3 new collaborations set to start from October
  - Physics → General RSE dev / Python
  - Economics → Infrastructure
  - Mechanical Engineering → Optimisation/Python

# Lessons learned

## Positives

- Diverse applications (Research domain/Software).
- Recognise utility of improving code (maintenance, usability, extensibility, performance).
- Many wanted to use the collaboration to upskill.
- Useful method of raising awareness of RSE work and extend RSE network
- Gives the opportunity to the team to be more in control on what they are working on.
- Gives experience on review, project interview, process management.

## Improvements

- Use clearer language in the call.
  - Scope was too ambitious in many applications.
  - Clarity about “impact”.
- Emphasise the utility of sharing existing code.
- Avoid timing calls around exam periods.

## Things to keep in mind:

- Organising the call, Reviews, Interviews take a LOT of time
- Communicating through 6 faculties requires contacts in each of them
- More need than capacity!

# Thank you!

What's next?

- Continue to run the call every year
- Try to find more funding :) to choose more projects
- Run a quarterly smaller version  
*(Very similar to the Imperial's 'open source booster' programme)*

