Enabling an equitable digital society

Opportunity status:	Open
Funders:	**Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)**
Funding type:	Grant
Total fund:	£5,000,000
Award range:	£625,000 - £1,250,000
Publication date:	22 June 2021
Opening date:	22 June 2021
Closing date:	14 September 2021 16:00 UK time

Last updated: 10 August 2021

Apply for funding to explore and develop human-centred digital technologies and services that enable an equitable society.

You must be based at a UK research organisation eligible for EPSRC funding.

Your team must include:

- researchers from at least two disciplines across the EPSRC, ESRC and AHRC portfolio
- at least one early-career researcher at lecturer level as principal or co-investigator
- at least one researcher co-investigator at postdoctoral level.

Your project must be at least 50% within the remit of EPSRC.

The full economic cost of your project can be between £625,000 to £1.25 million. We will fund 80% of the full economic cost.

Who can apply

Standard EPSRC eligibility rules apply. Research grants are open to:

- UK higher education institutions
- research council institutes
- UKRI-approved independent research organisations
- public sector research organisations
- NHS bodies with research capacity.

Read the guidance on **institutional eligibility**.

You can apply if you are resident in the UK and meet at least one of these criteria:

- are employed at the submitting research organisation at a level equivalent to lecturer or above
- hold a fixed-term contract that extends beyond the duration of the proposed project, and the host research organisation is prepared to give you all the support normal for a permanent employee
- hold an EPSRC, Royal Society or Royal Academy of Engineering fellowship aimed at later career stages
- hold fellowships under other schemes (please contact EPSRC to check eligibility, which is considered on a case-by-case basis).

Holders of postdoctoral level fellowships are not eligible to apply for an EPSRC grant.

Opportunity specific eligibility

To make the project eligible, we expect the following posts on the application:

- at least one early-career researcher at lecturer level as principal or co-investigator.
- at least one researcher co-investigator at postdoctoral level, clearly justifying their roles on the team.

International researchers are not eligible to be principal or co-investigators for this opportunity. They can, however, be involved in projects as visiting researchers, project partners or advisory board members, and can undertake work for the project via subcontract if necessary.

Read the **EPSRC guidance on investigator eligibility**.

Early career researchers

EPSRC does not have strict definitions of early career researchers for the purpose of this opportunity. This is broad, and could encompass, for example:

- postdoctoral research associates or fellows
- lecturers within the first few years of their lectureship
- lecturers who have never led on a grant.

This is largely self-defined by the individual.

If someone with a senior job title considers themselves to be early career, this should be clearly justified in the track record section of the case for support.

Subject to standard eligibility rules, inclusion of early career researchers including PDRAs within teams is strongly encouraged. PDRA roles not covering the duration of the award may be requested, but due consideration must be given to career development.

All PDRAs should have the opportunity to develop transferable technical and soft skills to enable them to progress in their careers. The contribution of all PDRAs must be clearly defined and justified.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

UKRI encourages applications from research teams exploiting the strength of diversity in the wider UK research and innovation community.

Applicants are expected to consider these issues from the earliest stage of building their teams through to the delivery of awarded projects, and embed equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) considerations into the design of the research methodology. A demonstrated commitment to EDI in both the project team and the work undertaken, is a key requirement of this call, and will form an integral part of the assessment criteria.

We are committed to supporting the research community, offering a range of flexible options which allow applicants to design a package that fits their research goals, career and personal circumstances. This includes:

- career breaks
- support for people with caring responsibilities
- flexible working
- alternative working patterns.

With this in mind, we welcome applications from academics who job share, have a part-time contract, or need flexible working arrangements.

Please see additional **EPSRC equality, diversity and inclusion considerations in grant applications guidance**.

We particularly encourage applicants from underrepresented backgrounds, early career researchers, and those who have followed non-traditional career paths.

Project partners, subcontractors and dual roles

Projects are expected to involve project partners from third sector organisations, and (if relevant) industrial partners or government.

Project partners are expected to provide specific contributions, either in cash or in kind, to the project. Where project partners do require funding for minor costs such as travel and subsistence, this will usually be paid at 80% full economic cost (FEC). These costs should be outlined and fully justified in the proposal and will be subject to peer review.

Subcontractors may also be factored into projects by the host organisation to deliver a specific piece of work. This will be subject to the procurement rules of the host organisation. All costs that support the delivery of the subcontract are eligible and will be paid at 80% FEC unless otherwise stated, these should be outlined and fully justified in the proposal and will be subject to peer review.

An organisation or individual can act as both a project partner and subcontractor, however this must be fully justified and will be subject to peer review. As a rule we would expect project partner related costs to be minor.

Where the project needs work to be undertaken that is more significant and includes costs other than travel and subsistence, then the organisation or individual to be contracted may need to be included as both a project partner and a subcontractor.

An example of where dual roles might be required is when an organisation or individual is giving to the project in kind, but are also selected to deliver other work to the project involving non-minor costs to be covered via a subcontract.

This definition of dual subcontractor and project partner roles is a pilot for EPSRC. This was implemented in order to enable third sector partners to receive recognition as a project partner for the elements of their contribution to the project that is in an integral or meaningful capacity, which they would not receive if they were included solely as a subcontractor.

Repeatedly Unsuccessful Applicants Policy

Submissions to this call will count towards the **EPSRC Repeatedly Unsuccessful Applicants Policy**.

There is no specific rule about investigators being present on more than one bid, but investigators must consider carefully whether they would be able to meet the commitments or time requirements of both research programmes, should both bids be successful. Applicants should consider how peer reviewers may respond to this, and address this in their proposal (for example, in the justification of resources) as they feel appropriate.

What we're looking for

Synopsis

The EPSRC digital economy theme is seeking high-quality multidisciplinary, sociotechnical and co-created projects aimed at building activities in the **equitable digital society priority area**.

Projects should explore human-centred, transformational digital technologies and services to achieve an equitable digital society. Projects should not, however, solely explore digital equitability without generating novel technical outputs. Proposals addressing the breadth of the priority area are welcomed.

This opportunity is funded by the EPSRC digital economy theme, which supports research to rapidly realise the transformational impact of digital technologies on aspects of:

- community life
- cultural experiences
- future society
- the economy.

Scope

This call aims to support novel, adventurous multidisciplinary, sociotechnical and co-created research to create an equitable digital society.

All research should be grounded in an understanding of:

- human-centred design of digital technologies
- equity, fairness, inclusivity, and barriers to equitability in the digital economy
- the nature of inclusion in digital environments
- the nuanced experience of marginalised groups online
- the intersectional effects of the digital economy on people's welfare.

Proposals spanning the breadth of the equitable digital society priority area are welcomed. Potential research topics could include, but are not limited to:

- novel, transparent and accountable digital tools, processes and methods for the protection of citizens' rights and for individuals to make informed decisions (for example, related to financial and legal matters)
- creation of digital tools, processes and methods to enhance equity
- one or more areas relating to EDI in the digital economy, for example:
  - understanding and addressing harmful algorithmic biases, including their social origins
  - facilitating inclusion and agency through design of usable and accessible digital applications and services
  - understanding the digital needs of disenfranchised communities and developing accessible tools to allow their integration into the digital economy
- understanding future digital literacy needs, and developing tools for education and professional development to equip communities with the skills to thrive in the digital economy
- alternatives to the current designs of digital spaces and data economic models, and blueprints for next generation digital platforms and services (for example, financial services).

There is scope for projects with an international dimension. One of the key assessment criteria for proposals is 'national importance'. The purpose of the national importance assessment criteria is to encourage applicants to articulate why it's important for their research to be supported by the UK taxpayer so that the UK remains internationally competitive. As long as this is clearly articulated, projects are welcome to incorporate an international dimension or a comparative element between the UK and other countries.

Requirements

At its core, the equitable digital society priority area and the wider digital economy theme is about improving people's lives.

Projects should seek to benefit marginalised and vulnerable people and groups, clearly identify citizens' needs, and explain how these will be addressed as an outcome of the research.

Projects should partner with the third sector, as well as (where relevant) industry, government and other organisations to define and achieve a shared vision for an equitable digital society.

Research undertaken must be interdisciplinary and sociotechnical in nature, and include researchers from across a range of disciplines, balanced across the technical and social sciences, and the humanities.

Projects are expected to:

- have a multidisciplinary team of researchers from at least two disciplines across the EPSRC, ESRC and AHRC portfolio
- be at least 50% within EPSRC's remit to qualify for funding.
- include at least one early-career researcher at lecturer level as principal or co-investigator, and at least one researcher co-investigator at postdoctoral level, clearly justifying their roles on the team
- demonstrate a commitment to EDI in both the project team and the work undertaken
- embed responsible innovation throughout the project, ensuring research is carried out in a sustainable, equitable and ethical way, and promotes sustainable, equitable and ethical outcomes
- involve a clear stakeholder and meaningful community engagement element, and integrate co-creation into the heart of the research methodology (for example, incorporating adequately resourced participatory research methods)
- provide a clear plan for achieving sustained benefits to society beyond the lifetime of the grant, for example by incorporating a separate phase of the project focusing exclusively on sustaining impacts after the completion of the initial research phase, with appropriate time and resources allocated for this
- demonstrate a clear methodological approach
- involve one or more third sector partners
- allocate budget for engagement and networking with the cohort of projects funded through this call, and provide a comprehensive plan for these activities.

Types of project that would not be eligible for this call are:

- projects solely addressing the technological design of digital technologies and services, with no stakeholder engagement
- projects solely exploring digital equitability, without generating novel technical outputs.

Commitment to sustainable, equitable and responsible research practices

Projects are required to:

- demonstrate a commitment to integrating EDI into their programme of work
- present a plan for responsible research and innovation, in your proposal please refer to the **AREA framework (EPSRC)**.

Projects will be expected to provide plans for ensuring the sustainability of the research impacts beyond the lifetime of the grant.

Projects should consider how the work undertaken can be undertaken in an environmentally sustainable way, referencing any actions undertaken to ensure taken to reduce the potential environmental impacts of the project.

Methodological considerations

Applicants are encouraged to think creatively about their research methodologies, and consider incorporating elements such as:

- placements
- knowledge exchange
- public engagement
- participatory research methods
- "research in the wild" (research which identifies a genuine user need, exposes potential research ideas to beneficiaries and co-creates solutions with users).

Project partners

Projects are expected to involve project partners from third sector organisations, and (if relevant) industrial or government partners.

Charity partners are welcomed. An organisation or individual can act as both a project partner and subcontractor, however this must be fully justified and will be subject to peer review. Please refer to 'Who can apply' section for further detail.

The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) is interested in the 'equitable digital society' initiative and is open to having discussions with academics on their approaches and potential collaborations.

If interested, please contact **pavle.avramovic@fca.org.uk** and **vishal.jalota@fca.org.uk** for further information.

Funding available

Funding will support five to 10 interdisciplinary, sociotechnical, co-designed projects addressing research to create an equitable digital society. Successful proposals will be funded at 80% FEC.

Projects may be of any duration.

Proposals should give due consideration to ensuring sustainability of research impacts and ongoing community benefits after the completion of the grant.

Equipment over £10,000 in value (inclusive of VAT) is not available through this call. Smaller items of equipment (individually under £10,000) should be in the

Directly Incurred – Other Costs heading.

For more information, please see **EPSRC equipment funding guidance**.

Responsible innovation

EPSRC is fully committed to developing and promoting responsible innovation. Research has the ability to not only produce understanding, knowledge and value, but also unintended:

- consequences
- questions
- ethical dilemmas
- unexpected social transformations.

We recognise that we have a duty of care to promote approaches to responsible innovation that will initiate ongoing reflection about the potential ethical and societal implications of the research that we sponsor, and to encourage our research community to do likewise.

Responsible innovation creates spaces and processes to explore innovation and its consequences in an open, inclusive and timely way, going beyond consideration of ethics, public engagement, risk and regulation.

Innovation is a collective responsibility, where funders, researchers, interested and affected parties, including the public, all have an important role to play.

Applicants are expected to work within the **EPSRC Framework for Responsible Innovation**.

Applicants should consider responsible innovation throughout the research project, and include, for example, details of anticipatory work and stakeholder inclusion plans in the proposal.

How to apply

Applying through Je-S

Applicants should ensure they are aware of and comply with any internal institutional deadlines that may be in place. You should prepare and submit your proposal using the research councils' **Joint Electronic Submission system (Je-S)**.

When adding a new proposal, you should go to documents, select New Document, then select:

- council: 'EPSRC'
- document type 'Standard Proposal'
- scheme 'Standard'
- call/type/mode 'Equitable Digital Society.

After completing the application you must 'Submit document' which will send your application to your host Organisation's administration.

your host organisation's administration is required to complete the submission process. Applicants should 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 14 September 2021.

As well as the Je-S application form, the following documents must be submitted.

You should attach your documents as pdfs to avoid errors. They should be completed in single-spaced Arial 11 font or similar-sized sans serif typeface.

Case for support

10 pages:

- two on your track record
- seven on the scientific case, taking into consideration how EDI and responsible research and innovation will be integrated at the core of the proposed work
- one additional page to outline your plans for ensuring sustainability of your research impacts beyond the lifetime of the grant.

Workplan

One page.

Justification of resources

Two pages.

CVs

Up to two A4 sides each only for named:

- post-doctoral staff
- researcher- co-investigators (research assistants who have made a substantial contribution to the proposal and will be employed on the project for a significant amount of time)
- visiting researchers.

Project partners letters of support

No page limit, from all project partners included in the Je-S form.

Letters of support

Optional attachment. No page limit. Up to three are permitted in exceptional circumstances that do not meet the requirement for project partner letters of support.

Cover letter

Optional attachment. No page limit, not seen by peer review.

Further guidance

Read the **EPSRC advice on writing proposals**.

EPSRC will not fund a project if it believes that there are ethical concerns that have been overlooked or not appropriately accounted for.

All relevant parts of the ethical information section must be completed. Read further **guidance on the ethical information section of the Je-S form**.

EPSRC guidance can be found under 'Additional Information'.

How we will assess your application

Assessment process

This call is an invitation for proposals. Proposals will undergo postal peer review, followed by a panel, resulting in a rank ordered list. A decision is expected to be made within two weeks of the panel meeting.

The reviewers will comment on how well the proposal meets both EPSRC's standard and call specific assessment criteria. If sufficiently positive comments are received, applicants will be invited to respond to these comments before being considered by a prioritisation panel.

The panel will rank the proposals in prioritisation order for funding using the reviewers' comments and the principal investigator response.

Call specific assessment criteria

Fit to call (primary)

The alignment of the proposed research to the aims and objectives of the opportunity, making reference to the following:

- how the project addresses one of the suggested research topics, or otherwise contributes to creating an equitable digital society
- how EDI has been prioritised, both in the composition of the research team and in the programme of work
- how the applicants will bring disciplines together to ensure the project achieves a result greater than the sum of its parts
- how co-design with citizens or stakeholders will be incorporated into the methodology and deliver impact; appropriateness of resources for this
- how responsible research and innovation has been incorporated, ensuring sustainable, equitable and ethical growth in any sectors of relevance
- how the applicants will ensure sustainability of the research impacts beyond the lifetime of the grant.

Standard assessment criteria

Quality (primary)

The research excellence, making reference to:

- how the proposed research will contribute to creating an equitable digital society
- the novelty, relationship to the context, timeliness and relevance to identified stakeholders
- the ambition, adventure, transformative aspects or potential outcomes
- the suitability of the proposed methodology and the appropriateness of the approach to achieving impact.

National importance (secondary major)

How the research:

- contributes to or helps maintain the health of other research disciplines
- contributes to addressing key UK societal challenges
- contributes to future UK economic success and development of emerging industries
- meets national needs by establishing or maintaining a unique world leading activity
- complements other UK research funded in the area, including any relationship to the EPSRC portfolio.

Applicant and partnerships (secondary)

The ability to deliver the proposed project, making reference to:

- appropriateness of the track record of the applicant(s)
- balance of skills of the project team, including project partners.

Resources and management (secondary)

The effectiveness of the proposed planning and management and whether the requested resources are appropriate and have been fully justified, making reference to:

- any equipment requested, or the viability of the arrangements described to access equipment needed for this project, and particularly on any university or third-party contribution
- any resources requested for activities to either increase impact, for public engagement or to support responsible innovation
- any resources requested to support co-creation with users
- resources allocated to engaging with the cohort of projects funded through this opportunity.

Feedback

The postal peer review commentary will comprise the feedback to the applicants. No feedback will be provided from the prioritisation panel process, beyond the publication of the rank-ordered list, unless this is specifically requested by the panel.

Nominating reviewers

As part of the application process you will be invited to nominate up to three potential reviewers who you feel have the expertise to assess your proposal.

Please ensure that any nominations meet the **EPSRC Policy on conflicts of interest**.

For more information about the reviewer selection process please see the related content links.

Guidance for reviewers

For more information about the EPSRC peer review process, read **EPSRC guidance for reviewers**.

Please ensure that you comment on the fit to call of the proposals, focusing on call scope and basing your assessment around the call-specific criteria.

Read our guidance for **reviewing EPSRC standard grants**.

Contact details

For help and advice on costings and writing your proposal please contact your research office in the first instance, allowing sufficient time for your organisation's submission process.

Get help with Je-S

Any queries regarding the submission of proposals through Je-S should be directed to the Je-S helpdesk.

Email: **jeshelp@je-s.ukri.org**

Telephone: 01793 444164

Ask a question about this opportunity

Please contact a member of the digital economy team.

Dr Greg Smith

Email: **gregory.smith@epsrc.ukri.org**

Dr Sonia Raikova

Email: **sonia.raikova@epsrc.ukri.org**

EPSRC Digital Economy Theme

Email: **digitaleconomy@epsrc.ukri.org**

Additional info

Additional grant conditions

The awards will be made on the terms and conditions of UKRI grants.

Additional conditions may be included at the award stage.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

You are expected to prepare a full EDI plan for the duration of this grant to demonstrate best practice in EDI throughout the lifetime of this funding award.

Background

The EPSRC digital economy theme seeks to rapidly realise the transformational impact of digital technologies and services on aspects of:

- community life
- cultural experiences
- future society
- the economy.

It strives to bring together researchers in disciplines such as:

- ICT
- mathematical sciences
- engineering
- physical and life sciences
- social sciences
- economics
- arts and humanities.

With stakeholders in different application domains to create digital technologies, platforms and solutions that are designed with and for users of the digital technology.

In 2020, the digital economy theme developed five new priority areas, which are at the heart of digital economy theme research. One of these priority areas, "equitable digital society", is the focus of this call.

To help set the context for this opportunity, the full description of the equitable digital society priority area is as follows.

Digital technologies are having a profound effect on the organisation of societies and the practices of everyday life. However, the benefits of the digital economy are not equally distributed, for example between different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. In some cases, digital technologies are creating new challenges of social division and inequality.

The equitable digital society priority focuses on addressing these issues by challenging the assumption that technology alone is sufficient, and instead promotes the co-creation and design of appropriate digital technologies and services that will support a fairer, more inclusive society.

Crucially, this will require academia, industry, the third sector, government, and other relevant organisations to work together to identify and prioritise citizens' needs to define a shared vision for an equitable digital society and how it can be achieved.

The aim is to reach greater social, political, and economic inclusion, and to support social cohesion, whilst minimising the emergence of new spheres of exclusion. This may enable greater creativity, productivity, and enhanced wellbeing of all citizens.

An ambitious outcome would be the judicious use of digital technologies and services across all societies which supports:

- inclusion
- equality
- participation
- social justice.

To align with this priority, research should commit to a co-creation approach with a wide range of citizens:

- including both socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged communities
- ensuring a range of cultural perspectives.

Processes for these citizens' engagement, consultation and representation in the design and use of digital technologies, platforms and services should be incorporated into the research.

An equitable digital society should aim to realise digital benefits for all, empower the disempowered, and create technologies that will reduce inequalities and shape inclusive societies to help reach the best version of our increasingly digitalised world.

The scope of this opportunity has been developed through extensive engagement with stakeholders across academia, industry, and UKRI, including members of the Digital Economy Programme Advisory Board.

Read about the **mission, priorities, funding and investments of the digital economy theme**.

Supporting documents

- **Equality Impact Assessment (DOCX, 60KB)**

Timeline

○ **22 June 2021**
Opening date

○ **14 September 2021**
Closing date

○ **February 2022**
Prioritisation panel

○ **End of March 2022**
Funding decision

https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/enabling-an-equitable-digital-society