EPIC Futures NI
Guidance on the Governance and Management of Grants

EPIC Futures NI Funding Context

EPIC Futures NI is a Local Policy Partnership (LPIP) hub, led by Ulster University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Innovate UK.

EPIC Futures NI has been allocated £4.8 million to help reduce regional disparities in economic, social and environmental challenges faced by local communities.

EPIC Futures NI aims to contribute towards a prosperous and sustainable future for Northern Ireland. By working in partnership with academia, policy, community and voluntary sector to jointly co-design policy and programmes that will help remove the barriers that people face to fair and meaningful employment.

£1 million has been allocated to the EPIC Futures Policy Commissioning Fund. The call will be managed in two phases.

Phase 1. Up to £30,000 (Oct-Nov 2024 application process) with a maximum spend of £250k.
Phase 2. May-June 2025 application process with an estimated spend of £750k. Threshold limit to be confirmed before Phase 2 call.

Governance Standards and Principles

Ulster University (Ulster) works to the purpose and principles of **The Government Functional Standards on Grants**. Ulster is not a government department, arms-length body or public sector body for which these standards usually apply. However, the purpose and principles will be upheld as set out in this guidance.

Purpose:

"The purpose.....is to set expectations for the management of grants, and to promote efficient and effective grant making to ensure funding is used as intended and provides value for money through high quality delivery."

Principles:

"Those engaged in managing grants at scheme and award level shall ensure:
1. grants objectives are aligned to government policy and organisational objectives;

2. the application of this standard is proportionate and appropriate, and is reflected in the approach taken to governance, management frameworks and controls, having regard to an accepted balance of opportunity and risk;

3. grants are made in the best interest of the public, the public purse, and operate in line with 'Managing Public Money';

4. funding is administered with optimum efficiency, economy, effectiveness, and prudence, to maximise value for public money;

5. responsibilities and accountabilities are defined, mutually consistent, and traceable across all levels of management; and

6. public service codes of conduct and ethics and those of associated professions are upheld."

Ulster University Processes for Managing Public Money

Ulster University has robust systems and processes for managing public money and following grant funding rules. Due diligence will be upheld in the administration and distribution of the funding.

Ulster University has an approved process for reviewing and awarding grants and will follow the established governance policies, systems and processes to ensure decisions and payments are approved by authorised persons, awarded and managed efficiently.

Applications will be invited through an open commissioning call process ('call' or 'the call') with details on Ulster University Website for Phase 1 (www.ulster.ac.uk/epic) and the EPIC Futures Website for Phase 2.

Authorisation and decision making

- Applications will be submitted using the online form www.ulster.ac.uk/epic
    - All supporting documentation should be attached to the application by the closing date, or the application will be considered ineligible
- A three stage process will be adopted.
    - Stage 1. Eligibility Screening base on eligibility criteria
        - Ulster University EPIC Futures Team
    - Stage 2. Scored independent assessment (see Appendix 1)
        - Ulster University - 2 policy experts and 2 academics
    - Stage 3. Reviewer panel assessment
        - Department for Communities (DfC), Department for Education, Department of Finance (DoF) policy experts, academic co-investigators and supporting researchers linked to EPIC Futures NI
- All reviewers will rate each application independently in line with the scoring criteria outlined at application stage before attending the panel assessment for peer review and consensus.
- Considerations of equality, diversity and inclusion and environmental sustainability are an important element within all applications and will be assessed within the criteria set out below.
- Reviewers will also consider the appropriateness of costs sought.

Scoring Criteria

Relevance to policy and practice related to employability and skills	Identification of a clear need for the proposal to advance knowledge within the employability, skills and labour market landscape. Demonstratable evidence of relevance to UK, NI and/or Cross Border key policy agendas. There must be reference to how findings/outputs will have relevance for NI stakeholders with policy responsibilities and/ or for strengthening policy in practice.	40%
Methodology and Approach	Demonstrate an understanding of the EPIC Futures NI theme(s) being addressed. Identification of knowledge gaps related to theme(s). Identification of the approach. This will include key stages, milestones, deliverables, outputs and timelines. A detailed overview of the proposed methodology. Depending on the type of proposal, this may/should include, the data being used/collected, sampling and access. Data management and ethics (if applicable). Engagement, dissemination and impact strategy.	40%
Lead/Team, experience and collaboration	Outline how the skills and experience of the Lead/Team align with the proposed project. If relevant, outline team composition and dynamics. Demonstrate ability to develop policy orientated knowledge and outputs. Demonstrate track record of collaboration. Outline recruitment process for any new team members hired to ensure it will be within timeframe.	20%

- Applications which pass eligibility checks and score over a minimum threshold will be recommended for funding. Funding will be awarded up to a maximum of £30K per project, until the £250k funding pot for phase 1 is allocated[1]. If the full funding pot is not allocated due to not enough projects meeting the threshold, the remaining funding will roll over into phase 2. In instances where scores align and funding is limited, projects may be partially funded. This decision will rest with the assessment panel.
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[1] Your proposal could score over the threshold but due to other projects scoring higher and the allocations of funds, it may not get funded.

- The panel may request minor changes to the methods or scope (if relevant) which if offered funding, would be a condition of acceptance.
- Due diligence will be carried out by Ulster University following good practice guideline and standards as part of the eligibility, evaluation and pre-award process. This will include but is not limited to;
    - Company House checks
    - Policy and document checks
    - Audited accounts (where appropriate)
    - Conflict of Interest
    - Appendix 2. Sets out the approach to Due Diligence (proportionate to funding)
- Successful applicants will be notified of a successful award through a Grant Award Letter of Offer (LoO)
- A Grant Funding Agreement will be issued to the Lead Applicant outlining the value of the award, contract terms and conditions and mandatory paperwork to be returned e.g. confirmation of acceptance.
- Under current restrictions, no procurement, commercial, business development or supply chain activity with any Russian or Belarusian entity as lead, partner or subcontractor will be funded. This includes any goods or services originating from a Russian or Belarusian source.

Managing Grants

- Grants will be awarded to one Lead UK based Applicant (academics / researchers / organisations). The fund encourages Cross Border Collaboration (Island of Ireland) and with those in other countries (particularly areas where policy is set by devolved institutions) for the specific purposes outlined in the EPIC Futures Policy Commissioning Call Guidance.
- The grant recipient will be issued with a Grant Funding Agreement outlining contract terms and conditions and defined purpose of the grant.
- The grant recipient will ensure that delivery of the Funded Activities does not put the Authority in breach of the UK's domestic or international obligations defined under the Subsidy Control Act and complete necessary Subsidy control reporting.
- The grant recipient will be set up as a New Supplier to Ulster University for the purpose of grant payment. Ulster's Finance Department will verify New Supplier details directly with the grant recipient.
- On completion of Ulster's New Supplier procedures, which includes fraud prevention controls, a purchase order will be raised, ensuring the correct authorisation process is followed in accordance with Ulster's financial procedures.
- Authorisation processes and procedures have been agreed with Ulster's finance and procurement departments in line with Ulster's Procurement Policy. Purchase order approval is strictly controlled within the Ulster finance system.
- Grant changes will be managed by Ulster as and when required.

- A maximum amount of £30,000 can be applied for in Phase 1 from a £250k allocation.
- Claims Process (see Appendix 3 and 4)
    - All claims will be paid quarterly in arrears in line with your project start/ end date upon successful completion of project milestones as verified by a member of the EPIC Futures NI Team.
    - Grant recipient will submit an invoice along with statement of expenditure and supporting evidence to the EPIC Futures NI Team.
    - Claim notification, confirmation of project process and management approval will take place.
    - Eligible costs must follow the UKRI Research Funding Guide (see pages 27-34) . Only eligible costs can be claimed.
    - EPIC Futures Team submits invoice to payments@ulster.ac.uk
    - All documents will be retained in line with Subsidy Control laws and document retention requirements.
    - Phase 2 only. For awards over £50,000 independent audit reports will be required before the final invoice can be processed. Threshold limit to be confirmed before Phase 2 call.
    - Once all verifications are complete, the EPIC Futures NI Team will confirm as 'goods received'.
    - Payments are processed by Ulster University's finance team and payment timeframes cannot be guaranteed.
    - If any part of the claim is disputed, the project team will work with the organisation to resolve the matter.
- Suspending or terminating a grant award
    - If an organisation is deemed by Ulster to be ineligible to receive funding, Ulster may withdraw the organisation's grant.
    - In this case Ulster will issue a letter to the organisation confirming the termination of the grant.
- Clawback – the process has been designed to minimise the risk of funding being clawed back. However, the terms and conditions included with the Grant Funding Agreement make provision for Ulster to clawback funding if the organisation provides incomplete, false, or misleading information.
- Any termination or clawback values which can be safely reallocated to other applicants, will be considered by the Co-directors and Principal Investigator for approval.

Assurance and Ulster's Project Monitoring

- All monitoring will be consistent with requirements of the Grant Funding Agreement.
- Grant monitoring will take place throughout the scheme
    - Named grant recipients
    - Value of grants awarded
    - Value of staged payments
    - Value of payments requested and completed.

- This information will be reported to the EPIC Futures NI Co-Director team and project funder quarterly and on an annual basis, in line with reporting requirements.
- Any proposals for corrective action will be assessed by Ulster.
- All approvals and amendments will be recorded.
- An EPIC Futures NI risk register is in place and will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. Risks will be escalated as and when required, in line with Ulster's standard practice for managing risk.
- The project will be carried out in accordance with all applicable ethical, legal, and regulatory requirements including but not limited to relevant provisions of the Data Protection Act 2018, the Bribery Act 2010, the Fraud Act 2006, the Equality Act 2010, and the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and in compliance with the terms of the Grant Funding Agreement.

Subsidy Control

- Grants are made under the Subsidy Control Act 2022 (legislation.gov.uk) .
- At pre-award stage organisations are asked to declare and detail whether they have the capacity to receive the funding within the limits for Minimal Financial Assistance or De Minimis aid, whichever is applicable.
- The organisation is required to return a detailed declaration stating how much subsidy they and their group have received within the past 3 years.
- There is clear provision setting out the organisations responsibility to declare its compliance in the terms and conditions.

Project Reporting and Evaluation

All proposals should have clearly defined outputs and a timeline for deliverables. Funded projects in Phase 1 will be expected to:

- Have monthly meetings with a member of EPIC Futures NI to discuss progress
- Provide an interim update in April/May 2025 in the form of a short report and a 10 minute presentation to the EPIC Futures NI co-director team.
- Present findings at the EPIC Futures Commissioning Call Policy workshop the first week of September 2025 (tentatively the 4th September 2025).
- Provide a final report of findings by the 15th September 2025.
- Engage with the EPIC Futures NI team yearly (during January each year), to share any further developments and impact of the funding.
- Agree to the UKRI terms and conditions to report to the funder for five years after the funding award.

Supporting Practices

- Counter Fraud
    - To eliminate possible fraud, Ulster has implemented proportionate due diligence, and stipulated that a valid invoice is required for payment. Grant awards can only be used for the purposes specified in the Grant Funding Agreement. These steps are in line with Ulster's standard financial management policies and procedures.

- Grant Making Capability and Resources
    - The funding will be distributed through two calls to ensure sufficient awarding and delivery by project end.
    - Applications will be received and reviewed through two grant calls
        - **Phase 1.** Up to £30,000 (Oct-Nov 2024 application process) with a maximum spend of £250k.
        - **Phase 2.** May-June 2025 application process with an estimated spend of £750k. Threshold limit to be confirmed before Phase 2 call.
    - A dedicated project team is responsible for scoring applications with relevant expertise in research, policy, skills and economy to review grant applications and manage the grant awards system.
    - Separation of duties are outlined in appendix 5.

- Agreements
    - The grant recipient will be issued with a Grant Funding Agreement outlining contract terms and conditions and defined purpose of the grant.
    - The grant recipient will ensure that delivery of the funded activities does not put the Authority in breach of the UK's domestic or international obligations defined under the Subsidy Control Act and complete necessary Subsidy control reporting.
    - On receipt of grant acceptance, Ulster's Finance Department will validate New Supplier details, including fraud prevention control documentation, directly with the grant recipient.

- Performance Monitoring
    - Projects funded are expected to engage with the wider EPIC Futures programme activities and report their progress and outcomes to Ulster.
    - Project monitoring will be commensurate with the level of grant, milestones, and timeline.
    - Progress reports will be requested depending on the level of funding sought and project duration. All reporting and evaluation requirements will be detailed in the Grant Funding Agreement.

- Document Management and Record Keeping
    - The project documents will be retained in line with the Subsidy Control Act 2022 requirements, currently 10 years.

- Reporting and Information
    - A record of the grants issued, invoices and supporting documentation received, subsidy control provisions and data regarding the beneficiaries and their projects will be collected and retained.

- Continuous Learning and Improvement
    - The governance and management process implemented for this project builds on Ulster's experience and knowledge of receiving and administering grant funding. Post project evaluation will be carried out to ensure lessons learnt are carried forward and incorporated into best practice.

Appendix 1. Assessment Panel

a. Role of the Assessment Panel

The purpose of the Assessment Panel is to consider and reach final agreement on the grading, ranking, and funding of proposals and, where necessary, to agree broad feedback for applicants. In instances when the number of proposals submitted are very high, feedback is not guaranteed.

b. Membership

The Assessment Panel will be made up of external experts with the relevant experience and expertise in policy, research and academia. This includes, Department for Communities (DfC), Department for Education, Department of Finance (DoF) policy experts, academic co-investigators and supporting researchers linked to EPIC Futures NI

The quorate for the Assessment Panel will be two academics and two policy experts.

The Assessment Panel will meet remotely via video conference OR in-person (dependant on panel member availability) for application assessment when a quorum is met.

c. **The Role of the Chair**

The Assessment Panel will be chaired by either Professor Kristel Miller or one of the co-directors on EPIC Futures NI. For information, the role of the Chair is:

- to have read and familiarised themselves with all applications and technical review scoring.
- to oversee and to run the Assessment Panel meeting.
- to set the context and tone for the meeting in terms of process and methods of working,
- to ensure that the meeting keeps to time.
- to seek clarification of the panel's views and to ensure there is appropriate discussion before the panel agrees a final grading for each proposal.
- to rank those proposals in the funding range with a final score
- to ensure that all procedures and protocols are followed and to refer to EPIC Futures team for guidance when necessary.
- to summarise final approvals and conditions on awards and propose resubmissions where necessary.

d. The Role of Assessment Panel Members. For information, the role of the Assessment Panel member is:

- to have familiarised themselves with the guidelines and assessment criteria for the Call.
- to have alerted the Chair to any conflicts of interest they may have.
- to assess the applications and submit their scores.
- to attend the panel meeting to agree final grades and rankings for all proposals.
- to agree any feedback where applicable.

In undertaking the above tasks, panellists are expected to:

- exercise their knowledge, judgement, and expertise in order to reach clear, sound, evidence-based decisions.
- treat all applications as strictly confidential at all times.
- panel members should not allow any private knowledge of the applicant or the proposed project, to influence their judgement.

e. Frequency of Meetings

Frequency of meetings will depend on the volume of applications. It is expected that the Assessment Panel will meet within four weeks of Call closing date to review and assess applications. We will seek to ensure applications are considered in a timely manner.

f. Conflicts of Interest

It is vital that panel members are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process. Assessment Panel members (including the Chair) should not therefore take part in the assessment of any proposal where a conflict of interest could be construed. All Assessment Panel members must declare any conflict of interest regarding applications that are being considered. If anyone is in conflict with a proposal, s/he will be required to leave the room whilst the proposal is being discussed.

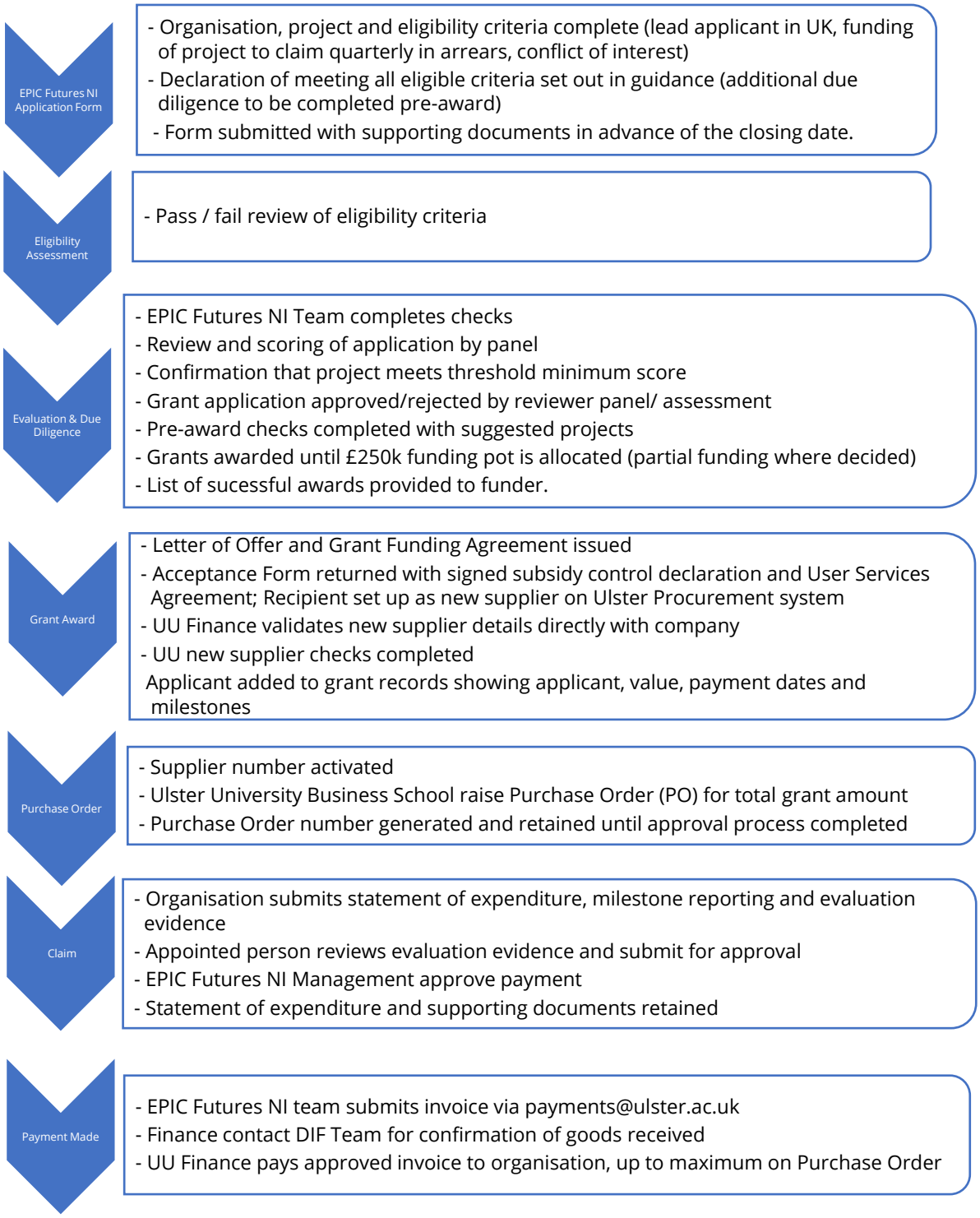
Appendix 2.

Due Diligence

	(Phase 1) **Grant Value to £30k**	**Mechanism for check**
Active company – registered in the UK	✓	Companies House Charity Commission Register
No disqualified directors	✓	Successful applicants will be asked to declare that there are no disqualified directors (where applicable)
Politically exposed people (PEP) and sanction flags	✓	Successful applicants will be asked to declare that no person with controlling interest has Russian or Belorussian citizenship
Accounts - late filing OR financial concerns	✓	Successful applicants will be required submitted accounts / financial statement (where applicable)
Viability checks	Declaration of Ability to fund first claim period and their ongoing contribution – for the duration of the project	Applicants will be asked to declare that they have the cash flow to claim quarterly in arrears

Appendix 3.

EPIC Futures NI Commissioning Call. Grant Application and Payments Process



Appendix 4.

Claims Procedure Table for Phase 1.

Claim Procedure	**Phase 1. Up to £30,000**
Statement of Expenditure, including eligible costs incurred and settled , signed by a director of the named Lead Applicant	✓
Claim reviewed to ensure consistency with costs approved in Open Call Grant Agreement	✓
Claim reviewed to ensure that costs are eligible and incurred and paid after the start date and before the end date of the project	✓
Sample of transactions and supporting documentation reviewed commensurate with level of funding	✓
Review of work completion or satisfactory progress by nominated member of EPIC Futures NI Team	✓
Claim approved	✓
Raise purchase order	✓
Purchase order number forwarded to grant recipient	✓
Grant recipient submits invoice	✓

Appendix 5. Separation of Duties

Stage / process	Principal Investigator and Co-investigators	Assessment, Review and Monitoring	Ulster University Business School & EPIC Futures NI Team
Application	Lead online information session Provide guidance on application process		Monitor number of applications Coordinate targeted publicity in line with requirements.
Initial Assessment to confirm eligibility			Record and confirm to Assessment Panel that eligibility requirements are met including Conflict of interest
Assessment Panel	Appoint the assessment panel and allocate applications based on area of expertise		Send applications to assessment panel Set up review meetings.
Review		Review application against scoring criteria Ensure application is feasible Review financial information, including confirmation that costs are necessary and appropriate Confirm achievability of project milestones and outputs Record scores	Record consensus scores/ decisions
Due Diligence			Company and financial checks Subsidy Control

Award	Approval process & inform funder		
Notification to Applicant			Letter of Offer (LoO) Grant Funding Agreement Ulster Finance Dept. notified of new supplier
Post award monitoring	Appoint representatives to provide feedback on progress Project updates included in quarterly reports	Any technical guidance from assessment panel included in reporting and monitoring schedule	Review of subsidy control declarations Project management and monitoring – monthly meetings/ quarterly and end of project reporting Budget vs spend monitoring Review interim statements of expenditure
Project completion	Review end of project report (milestones and outputs) Monitor project impact and follow on activity		Confirm project outputs have been achieved Initiate final payment via Ulster Finance systems Update project paperwork and financial monitoring.