



EU Joint Programme - Neurodegenerative Disease Research (JPND)

Procedures document

“Mechanisms and measurement of disease progression in the early phase of neurodegenerative diseases”

1. SCOPE

This document is for use by the funding organisations and for information to the applicants that apply to this call. It complements the call text by providing information on the evaluation and decision-making process. The funding organisations will make every reasonable effort to implement the call as described below with the aim to fund as many high-ranked proposals as possible.

2. MANAGEMENT OF THE CALL

The following bodies are responsible for operating the call and the evaluation process. Members of these bodies are not allowed to participate in proposals to this call.

- The Call Steering Committee is composed of representatives from the participating funding organisations. It takes all decisions regarding the call procedures, operations and funding.
- The Joint Call Secretariat is led by the German Aerospace Center, Project Management Agency. It manages the call and is a contact point for applicants and funding organisations.
- The JPND communications officer disseminates the call, hosts the call website and publishes the call results and fact sheets from the successful consortia.
- The Peer Review Panel is composed of internationally recognised scientists related to the call topic. It evaluates the proposals based on defined criteria and provides recommendation.
- The Patients and Public Involvement (PPI) network, coordinated by the PPI Secretariat (led by Innovation Fund Denmark), is a network of patients, carers and lay persons or professionals that evaluates full proposals with regard to PPI aspects.

3. PEER REVIEW

The Call Steering Committee suggests and nominates reviewers for the evaluation of proposals. When establishing the Peer Review Panel, international membership and a balance of gender and geographical representation is sought. Reviewers are not allowed to apply for this call. They are appointed for their scientific expertise and do not represent funding organisations. Their evaluations must be based on the evaluation criteria of the call. From among the reviewers, a chair will be ap-

pointed by the Call Steering Committee. The chair will ideally be selected from a country not participating in the call or from a different neuroscience discipline. Peer Review Panel members will not be remunerated for their efforts, but reimbursed for travel and accommodation expenses incurred when attending the Peer Review Panel meeting.

The electronic submission and evaluation system (“PT Outline”, provided by the German JPND partner DLR-PT) will be used to provide access to proposals and to collect written statements from the reviewers. It will also be used to declare adherence to regulations with regard to conflicts of interests and confidentiality. Each reviewer and PPI expert will be registered and informed by the Joint Call Secretariat. They will be able to access and evaluate only those proposals assigned to them until the consolidation (see chapters 6 and 7). Call Steering Committee Members will be registered by the Joint Call Secretariat and the respective account will allow them to access all proposals. The evaluation criteria and the scoring system will be described within the system.

4. CONFIDENTIALITY AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Any written or oral information from the evaluation process (except what is specified under “Communication” in sections 6 and 7) as well as the identity of the reviewers will remain confidential. The reviewers and PPI experts must confirm their compliance with confidentiality agreements and declare that no conflicts of interest exist before undertaking the evaluation process. During the Peer Review Panel meeting, participants with a declared conflict of interest with a specific proposal must leave the meeting room for the time of the respective discussion. A conflicted reviewer must not review a proposal. A disqualifying conflict of interest exists if a reviewer/expert:

- was involved in the preparation of the proposal,
- benefits professionally, financially or personally from approval or rejection of the proposal,
- has a close family or other personal or professional relationship with an applicant,
- is currently or has been working in the past five years in an applicant’s department.

In addition, a disqualifying conflict of interest may exist in the cases specified below. A case by case decision by the Call Steering Committee is needed in those cases.

- is a director, employee or trustee of an applicant’s institution,
- is or was employed by an applicant’s institution within the past three years,
- published together with an applicant in the past three years,
- joined a research collaboration together with an applicant in the past three years,
- is in any situation that would influence his or her ability to evaluate the proposal impartially, independently and objectively.

5. EVALUATION CRITERIA AND SCORING

Evaluation of the proposals will be conducted according to scientific criteria (equally weighted) and scores as well as PPI criteria and indicators.

SCIENTIFIC CRITERIA AND SCORES

- **Relevance** to the aim of the call.
- **Scientific quality** including level of innovation, originality and feasibility.

- **Transnational added value** from working together as a research consortium, including planned scientific interaction, knowledge exchange and training.
- **International competitiveness** and scientific expertise of participating research groups, including diversity in gender, geographic and seniority.
- **Deliverable outcomes** in the short, medium and long-term, including risk assessment and management, including a focus on open science and open access.

Score		Description and recommendation
5	Excellent	Fully recommended as it stands
4	Good	Recommended with minor weaknesses
3	Fair	May only be supported on the basis of major revisions
2	Weak	Not recommended, weaknesses predominate
1	Poor	Clear rejection, underdeveloped

Half-numbers may be used in order to indicate that a proposal is in between two scores. When using mean scores, decimal places may be utilized to fine-tune scoring for final ranking purposes.

PPI CRITERIA AND INDICATORS

- **Quality** and accessibility of the lay summary in the proposal.
- **Plan for the promotion** of research outcomes and dissemination activities.
- **Feasibility and quality** of the co-design in the application, e.g. with PPI partners, the general public, etc.
- **Transcultural added value** of PPI activities by involving regular partners in different countries.

Indicator	Description and recommendation
A	The PPI approach is excellent.
B	The PPI approach is reasonable.
C	The PPI approach is very insufficient or lacking.

6. PRE-PROPOSALS

FORMAL AND ELIGIBILITY CHECK

After the expiry of the submission deadline, the Joint Call Secretariat will check all proposals regarding their adherence to the joint eligibility conditions of the call and adherence to the proposal template. The proposal document submitted by the coordinator is the relevant source for all decisions. Proposals not meeting the joint eligibility conditions will be rejected without any revision and review. Joint eligibility conditions are:

- Date of submission (deadline)
- Number of participating countries (at least three)
- Number of participating groups (3 to 6 (or 7); max 2 from one country)

For proposals failing to adhere to the proposal template (e.g. exceeding page limits), the coordinator and all regular partners of the consortium will be informed about the identified shortcomings by the Joint Call Secretariat. They will be allowed to revise the proposal within 24 hours, following instructions from the Joint Call Secretariat. After passing the re-submission deadline, the Joint Call Secretariat will provide all information on the revisions to the Call Steering Committee, including a suggestion on which of the revised proposals should be accepted and which should be rejected. The Call Steering Committee will take a majority decision by email and on an individual basis for each proposal according to the eligibility conditions. Following the formal approval of the proposal, the funding organisations will check the proposals for compliance with their individual regulations. Each funding organisation will confirm or decline the eligibility of the respective applicants to the Joint Call Secretariat. Nevertheless, at the pre-proposal stage proposals including non-eligible partners will be accepted and sent for review as a later revision of the proposal is likely.

REVIEWER ASSIGNMENT

The Joint Call Secretariat will contact the reviewers to request and coordinate their participation. It will prepare a list of all proposals that includes the project title, the relevant diseases and keywords, the project partners and the scientific abstract. This list will be circulated to the reviewers, asking them to check for possible conflicts of interest and a self-assignment according to their specific expertise. In parallel, the Joint Call Secretariat will carry out an accompanying check for conflicts of interests. Based on the all results, and while preserving gender and geographical balance, it will assign each proposal to three reviewers while considering the following principles:

- Each proposal will be assigned to at least three reviewers. Additional reviewers may be included during the evaluation process, e.g. as a substitute reviewer
- Each reviewer should be assigned to at least three proposals. If possible, the number of evaluations per reviewer should not exceed ten proposals.
- Where there is no information on self-assignment available, the Joint Call Secretariat will make the assignment, thereby matching information from the scientific abstract of the proposal to the reviewers' keywords while preserving gender and geographical balance.
- Reviewers will not be assigned to a proposal if:
 - they are affiliated with an institution from the same country as the coordinator
 - they are affiliated with an institution from the same country as two project partners

- they have a conflict of interest (see section 3.3)

The list of participating reviewers and their assignment to individual proposals will be approved by the Call Steering Committee.

The PPI network will not be involved during the pre-proposal evaluation.

REMOTE EVALUATION

Reviewers will be asked to provide written statements and scoring until a given deadline. One week ahead and shortly after the deadline, the Joint Call Secretariat reminds those reviewers that have not yet delivered their evaluations. Where needed, respective proposals may be sent to a substitute reviewer. The Joint Call Secretariat will keep on collecting evaluations until the day of the decision, if needed. All available evaluations will be considered for the final decision.

As soon as the remote evaluation is finished, a consolidation will follow. It aims to align disparate evaluations by allowing the reviewers to consider their peers point of view and thus harmonise the outcome of the remote evaluation. The assigned reviewers will gain access to all available evaluations and may revise their own evaluation in the light of the other evaluations. Any revision of their own evaluation must be justified and will be tracked by the Joint Call Secretariat and communicated to the Call Steering Committee. However, if no revisions are made by the reviewers, strongly divergent evaluations will be accepted and no further attempts of harmonisation will be done.

DECISION

The Joint Call Secretariat will provide the individual written statements, the scores and the standard deviation for each proposal as well as the ranking list based on the arithmetic mean score. The members of the Call Steering Committee will meet online to decide on the number of proposals to be invited to the full proposal stage according to their rank order and the budget available for the call, seeking for a number of full proposals approximately matching a 3-fold oversubscription of the total available budget of the call. Call Steering Committee members not attending the meeting will be allowed to provide comments and votes beforehand. The Joint Call Secretariat will prepare the minutes of the meeting. Funding organisations envisaging an oversubscription of more than 4-fold should consider making individual arrangements, including:

- an increase of the earmarked budget;
- application of budget caps to research teams. If such caps are already in place, the requested maximum amount could be lowered.
- Redistribution of budgets within consortia (from oversubscribed to undersubscribed countries), where possible.

COMMUNICATION

The Joint Call Secretariat will inform all coordinators about the outcome of the pre-proposal evaluation, thereby providing the written statements from the remote evaluation. Coordinators of successful consortia will also receive information on the subsequent full proposal stage, including a full proposal template and information on proposal revision. In addition, and where relevant, coordinators will be asked to elaborate on the possibility of an internal budget redistribution. One important step towards reaching a more homogenous budget distribution among countries is a better involvement of EU-13 (e.g. Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland,

Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) and undersubscribed countries (i.e. countries that will likely not spend their dedicated budget). For this purpose, the maximum number of seven regular partners will be extended to researchers from underrepresented countries (i.e. a consortium comprising seven regular partners will be eligible if either a team from an EU-13 or from an underrepresented country will be added to the full proposal). To support the process, coordinators will be asked for their consent to voluntarily share the abstract of their proposal, which may be forwarded to potential teams from EU-13 and underrepresented countries by the respective Call Steering Committee members.

7. FULL PROPOSALS

REMOTE EVALUATION

The Joint Call Secretariat and the Call Steering Committee will conduct a formal and eligibility check of the full proposals as described in section 6. However, the inclusion of a non-eligible regular partner at the full proposal stage may lead to the rejection of the full proposal without further evaluation.

Reviewers will be selected among those who already attended the pre-proposal evaluation. Additional reviewers will be recruited if there is a specific need or in case that the number of available reviewers is not sufficient. For the reviewers' assignment, priority will be given to reviewers who already evaluated the respective pre-proposal. Additional reviewers will be assigned according to the principles described in section 6 and approved by the Call Steering Committee. Remote evaluation and consolidation will be done as described in section 6.

During the full proposal stage a PPI evaluation will be conducted (see section 5), which will be organized autonomously by JPND's PPI Network. The assignment of at least two PPI experts to each proposal will be done by the PPI Secretariat and communicated to the Call Steering Committee. The Joint Call Secretariat will support the PPI evaluation process by providing access to the proposals. The Call Steering Committee will approve the final PPI expert assignments. A written summary of the PPI evaluation will be provided for the Peer Review Panel meeting.

PEER REVIEW PANEL MEETING

The Joint Call Secretariat will provide the individual written statements, the scores and the standard deviation for each proposal as well as the preliminary ranking list based on the arithmetic mean score to all participants of the meeting. It will also brief the chair regarding the general evaluation conditions, the outcome of the written evaluation and the preliminary ranking. A subset of the reviewers will meet in person or online for a joint evaluation of the proposals. In addition, at least two PPI evaluators will be present at the panel meeting and will act as spokesperson to convey the main aspects of the PPI evaluation for each proposal. Call Steering Committee members may join the meeting as observers. A rapporteur selected from among the reviewers will give a brief overview of the proposal and summarize the available assessments. The other assigned reviewers and PPI experts may add to this introduction, followed by a discussion of the entire panel. Finally, the panel will agree on a funding recommendation and a final score for each proposal which is composed of the scientific score and the PPI indicator (see section 5). A ranking list will derive from the final scores. The panel may cluster proposals with similar overall quality and assign a final score to each cluster. Ideally, all decisions of the panel will be unanimous decisions. Nevertheless, in case of divergent opinions, a simple majority decision will be sought by the chair. Where applicable, the panel may

also comment on the appropriateness of the budget requested by the applicants. The Joint Call Secretariat will prepare the minutes of the meeting.

DECISION AND COMMUNICATION

The “virtual common pot” model will be used, i.e. each funding organisation will only fund its own approved applicants and no “cross-border funding” will apply. Consequently, details of what may or may not be funded are subject to the specific regulations of the respective funding organisation and may therefore vary. Additional deliverables (such as a Data Management Plan or Consortium Agreement) may be requested subject to the funding organisations Terms and Conditions.

Following the Peer Review Panel meeting, the Call Steering Committee will meet in person or online to initiate the decision-making process. The chair of the Peer Review Panel might be asked to join the meeting to provide scientific advice, if needed. Proposals will be envisaged for funding according to their rank order. When going down the ranking list, it will be verified for each proposal whether sufficient budget is available from the respective funding organisations to support all partners of the consortium. As long as this is ensured, the proposal will be considered for funding.

In the case that a funding gap occurs (i.e. the remaining budget of at least one funding organisation will not allow funding of the respective partner), priority will be given to overcome the funding gap by national arrangements, e.g. by increasing the available budget for the call. If the funding gap cannot be solved, the Call Steering Committee will continue by seeking for other high-quality proposals to be funded further down the ranking list.

In the case of ties between two or more proposals at the same ranking position (cluster), the Call Steering Committee may decide on the proposals to be funded within a cluster according to the following priority order:

1. maximise the number of high-quality proposals,
2. maximise the number of proposals involving partners from EU-13 countries and Turkey,
3. maximise the number of proposals involving countries that do not spent any budget,
4. maximize the budget spent for this call.

Proposals within a cluster that cannot be considered for funding because of non-solved funding gaps may be discussed again at the end of the decision-making process.

As soon as all fundable proposals have been identified and upon request of individual Call Steering Committee members, funding of proposals with unsolved funding gaps may be envisaged on the basis of transnational arrangements, e.g. by discussing budget re-distributions within the consortium. If more than one proposal is suggested for examination, the order will be given by the ranking list. The Joint Call Secretariat will lead the discussion internally and with the consortium. Any arrangements need to be agreed by all involved funding organisations and by the respective consortium. In the case that a solution can be found, the proposals will be considered for funding.

As additional time may be needed to identify solutions for overcoming of funding gaps and decisions must be taken in accordance with the national funding authorities, the final decision will be taken by E-Mail following the Call Steering Committee meeting. The Joint Call Secretariat will guide the decision-making process and prepare the minutes of the Call Steering Committee meeting and the final

decisions. Any unspent budgets will remain in the portfolio of the funding organisation. Therefore, it might be possible that the total budget earmarked for this call will not be spent completely.

When the decisions are validated by all funding organisations, the Joint Call Secretariat will inform all coordinators about the outcome of the full-proposal evaluation, thereby providing the written statements from the remote evaluation and PPI assessment as well as a summary from the Peer Review Panel meeting. Where proposals are to be funded, the project partners will subsequently be contacted by the respective funding organisations. The Joint Call Secretariat notifies the chair of JPND, the relevant Steering Committees and the JPND communication manager. The awarded consortia are published on the JPND website in alphabetical order of the project titles. The publication date is decided by the Call Steering Committee.