

Implementation Plan: SFI Spokes Programme

Operational Priority	S&E Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020 1: Strengthening RTDI in the S&E Region
Thematic Objective	1: Strengthening Research, Technological Development and Innovation
Investment Priority	(a) enhancing research and innovation (R&I) infrastructure and capacities to develop R&I excellence, and promoting centres of competence, in
Scheme	SFI Spokes
Categorisation Code	060
ERDF Certifying Authority	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
Managing Authority	Southern Regional Assembly
Intermediate Body	Science Foundation Ireland
Beneficiary	Higher Education Institutes
Grant Rate	100%
EU Co-Financing Rate	50% of public eligible expenditure declared

Objectives of Intervention.

The objective of the Spokes Programme is to promote the further development of existing SFI Research Centres to incorporate new areas of research, new industrial and academic collaborators.

Description of Intervention.

The Spokes Programme is an initiative to enable the addition of new industrial and academic partners and projects to an existing SFI Research Centre in the S&E region, so allowing the Centre to expand and develop in line with new priorities and opportunities aligned with the Research Prioritisation Exercise. This will ensure that the Research Centre retains its ability to do cutting edge research and its industrial relevance, and so enhance its sustainability. The Spokes programme also provides a vehicle to link together, in a meaningful and relevant way, different Research Centres. The Programme has been designed to deliver excellent oriented applied research results and discoveries in targeted projects associated with SFI Research Centres and hence will deliver significant economic and societal impact during the lifetime of the programme.

SFI Spokes will help link scientists and engineers in partnerships because under this programme Industrial and academic researchers (both scientists and Engineers) are linked through funding of projects delivered via the Spokes programmes. The SFI Spokes programme will enable scientists and engineers to address crucial research questions, foster the development of new and existing Ireland-based technology companies, attract industry that could make an important contribution

to Ireland and its economy, and expand educational and career opportunities in Ireland in science and engineering.

The Spokes Programme will contribute to the specific objective of the investment priority by enabling new industrial and academic partners to join existing strategic research projects. This will increase the level of strategic research activity in the S&E region and enable increased engagement by industry with the supported research centres.

For the Rolling Spokes Programme Industry partners are expected to contribute 50% cash contribution to the project. This high industry cost-share component reflects the importance and urgency of the programme to industry and to ensure maximum impact on growth and jobs.

For the Fixed Spokes Programme a minimum budgetary contribution of 30% will be required from industry, which can be composed of both in-kind and cash contributions; the cash contribution must be a minimum of 10% of the total award size, in line with the cost-share criteria of the main Research Centres call.

Responsibilities of Intermediary Body.

Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) will enter into an Administrative Agreement with the Regional Assembly which will set out in detail the responsibilities of each body. This agreement will be drafted initially by the Regional Assembly in consultation with SFI and the Office of Science, Technology & Innovation at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

SFI will be responsible for ensuring the effective implementation of the intervention and for full compliance with the Regulations, particularly those concerning financial management, control, publicity and public procurement. SFI commits to revising its EU Structural Funds Procedures Manual to comply with the requirements of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Circular on the management of EU co-funded programmes 2014- 20; and the EU regulations.

SFI will ensure that the beneficiary HEIs are provided with a grant award document (Letter of Offer) setting out the conditions of support for each operation, including the specific requirements concerning the products or services to be delivered under the operation, the financing plan, the time limit for execution and the conditions for use of the Structural Funds IT System 2014-2020.

SFI will be responsible for the drawdown of funding from DJEI and for the processing and authorisation of grant awards to the HEIs.

SFI will be responsible for ensuring that all payment claims for European

Structural and Investment Fund expenditure, submitted by the relevant Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), are supported by receipted invoices and audit documents, and that a clear and sufficient audit trail exists. Verification checks will be carried out by SFI and/or by other bodies on their behalf on the claims submitted and on the management and control systems in the HEIs. These checks will include procedures to verify the delivery of the research projects co-financed and the reality of expenditure claimed and compliance with applicable national and Community rules on, in particular, the eligibility of expenditure for support and public procurement.

SFI will also be responsible for ensuring in respect of co-financed Intervention/projects, that only eligible expenditure actually incurred is submitted to the Managing Authority. SFI is responsible for the certification of all expenditure incurred by the HEIs.

SFI will be responsible for submitting eligible expenditure in the format required by the Certifying Authority to the Regional Assembly (Managing Authority) in order for payments claims to be prepared for submission to the Certifying Authority. Project level data will be updated, as and when requested and specified, by the EU Structural Funds I.T. System.

SFI will compile monitoring/progress reports as requested by the Regional Assembly and cooperate with OP level evaluations as required. These reports will provide data on the integration of the Horizontal principles following a screening exercise to be undertaken by SFI. The contribution of the Irish exchequer and the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 will be acknowledged in all promotional material, annual reports, research laboratories and websites relevant to the co-funded awards, by use of appropriate logo and text references. SFI will ensure that the HEIs will comply with EU publicity requirements.

Responsibilities of Beneficiary Body.

The HEIs will be responsible for implementation of the intervention at local level. As the final beneficiaries in the cascade of reporting, they will be responsible for ensuring that only actual eligible expenditure incurred, and expenditure which comes under the terms of the research project(s) as approved, is certified. They will be required to ensure a clear audit trail exists in relation to EU co-funded expenditure and that all claims are supported by receipted invoices or, where this cannot be done, by accounting documents of equivalent probative value. Finally they are responsible for ensuring that all Annex III data is recorded on an appropriate system as required by Article 125, 2, (d).

Integration of Horizontal Principles.

SFI is committed to removing and mitigating any existing or perceived factors that

may limit the participation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) careers, and to redressing the gender imbalance amongst SFI award holders, of which 19% are female (Source: SFI Census 2012). One of SFI's Agenda 2020 KPI targets is to increase the proportion of female award holders to 25% by 2020. The aim in attaining this target is to facilitate the retention of excellent female researchers within academia.

To this end, SFI will focus on streamlining gender initiatives across all its programmes by providing supporting schemes and measures that can facilitate the retention, re-entry, retraining and career advancement of women in STEM research as follows:

- Advance Award/Industry Fellowships
- SFI Maternity/Adoptive Policy
- Flexible eligibility criteria for applicants to the SFI Investigators Programme
- Promotes other Non-SFI gender initiatives i.e. Athena Swan Charter

SFI Discover, the section charged with responsibility for outreach activities to the general public and to students at primary and secondary level.

SFI will track the participation of women in Research on an Annual basis through the Annual Census, both at an award holder level and as part of the Research team.

SFI will track the level of funding in the Environmental Science and Energy space over the period 2014 - 2020, however it must be stressed only funded proposals in these areas which demonstrate excellent science will be funded.

Spokes Call 2013 (Appendix 1)

Selection Process and Criteria.

1. Selection Process

There are open calls run for researchers in eligible Research Bodies, which generally have fixed deadlines. All submissions are subjected to competitive, international merit review processes carried out by a panel of leading experts who make recommendations to SFI Executive, or SFI Board as appropriate, who make the final decision on awards.

2. Selection Criteria

Applications to the Spokes programme must be made by the relevant SFI Research Centre Director. As such, the application can only be submitted to SFI from an eligible academic Research Body. All Research Centres are eligible to apply to

both the Fixed and Rolling Spoke call.

In addition to the requirement for scientific excellence, applications considered under the Spokes programme must clearly demonstrate the value of the research to the expansion, development and sustainability of the SFI Research Centre and the potential for economic and societal impact to Ireland. As part of the review process, reviewers will be asked to evaluate the potential impact of the application as articulated by the applicant in the Impact Statement.

A maximum of 3 pages is allowed for the impact statement. The statement should be as specific and comprehensive as possible and provide information that external reviewers will find helpful in assessing the potential impact of the proposed research activity.

The submission of an application to SFI shall be construed as consent by the applicant to participate in the peer review process. SFI reserves the right to refuse to grant permission to an applicant to submit a proposal to the SFI Spokes programme if it deems the applicant to be ineligible. Full proposals received to the Spokes Rolling call without prior written approval will be returned without review.

Applicants to the Spokes Rolling call must request an invitation to submit a full proposal.

The review process will take place in the following stages:

1. Postal Review (both Fixed and Rolling Spokes)

In accordance with the international peer review process used to evaluate proposals submitted to SFI, all eligible proposals will be forwarded to international experts for evaluation. SFI reserves the right to return applications without review where the applicant does not meet the eligibility criteria (or where the research programme does not fit with the remit of the Foundation). SFI Scientific Programme Managers/Officers will solicit reviews of proposals from at least three (3) peers with expertise in the substantive area of the proposed research who may be from academic or industrial settings. The applicant may specify up to three referees or companies who should not be approached to act as reviewers for his or her application due to the competitive and confidential nature of the research programme. SFI shall not refer the application to any of these three reviewers. Otherwise, selection of reviewers shall be at the sole and exclusive discretion of SFI.

Reviews received from peers will be collated and forwarded to applicants. Applicants will then be afforded the opportunity to submit a response (max. 2 pages including references) to reviewers' comments. Applicants will be given a

defined period of time in which to respond (advance notice of dates and guidelines relating to the response will be indicated to applicants). This response document will be considered by SFI alongside the proposal and postal reviews in making a funding decision. SFI reserves the right to implement an on-site panel review as part of the overall review procedure.

During the postal review process, the following review criteria will be applied with a scoring of 1 - 5 in place:

- Quality, significance, and relevance of the proposed research, including value for money and the potential to advance knowledge and understanding within its own field or across different fields
- Alignment/value add of the proposed project(s) with the current objectives of the SFI Research Centre
- Quality, significance, and relevance of the recent research record of the proposed investigator(s), taking into account the career stage of the applicant(s), and the applicant's record of securing non-exchequer funding
- Quality, significance, and relevance of the proposed research's potential contribution to demonstrably support and underpin enterprise competitiveness and societal development in Ireland

2. Full Proposal Panel Review

This is for applications to the Spokes Fixed Programme only.

All full proposals to the Spokes Fixed call will proceed to the panel review process. Panel members will be selected with broad scientific and programmatic experience and will cover a broad range of research areas relevant to the NRP areas.

Certain panel members with expertise in research translation and commercialisation will have the responsibility of assessing the potential impact of the proposed research. In addition to briefing material, panel members will receive the full proposal, anonymous postal reviews and the applicant's response to postal reviews. Panel members will assess the inputs of the postal peer reviews and the overall merit and priority of applications.

Panels will rank proposals and make recommendations for an application to be given consideration for funding by SFI by considering (1) the track record of the applicant, (2) the research programme and (3) impact. The scoring system used is 1 - 5 with 5 being outstanding.

The ranked list of fundable proposals will inform the final decision as to which

Research Centre Spokes proposals are to be funded by SFI Executive Committee and SFI Board.

Funded Fixed and Rolling Spokes from any future calls will be included in the Operational Programme.

Spokes Call 2014 (Appendix 2)

Selection Process and Criteria.

The selection process and criteria for the Spokes Call 2014 was identical to the spokes Call 2013 as outlined above

Appeals.

SFI has a formal Appeals Process which is published on the SFI Website.

1. Introduction

This policy establishes procedures and responsibilities for the appeal of the declination of a proposal by SFI.

In making its decision regarding funding, SFI takes into account the peer review assessments of the scientific and technical merits of a proposal, but also the value to Ireland of the research programme, the budget availability and programmatic priorities of the Foundation. Proposals are evaluated in open competitions via a combination of international peer review and strategic fit with SFI's mission. In addition to the principles espoused by SFI's core values, SFI uses the following principles in reaching its funding decisions: value for money, strategic impact, efficient use of the peer review system, internationalisation, critical mass, cohesion with other funding streams, and availability of funding.

The primary aim of the SFI appeals procedure is to ensure that SFI's review process itself has been fair and reasonable and that SFI's stated review procedures were followed. Although the appeal procedure is not a peer review process itself and will not re-open such a peer review process, it may address procedural errors in the peer review process, or other aspects of proposal review including: unaccounted-for conflicts of interest, inappropriate consideration of rumour / hearsay, or incomplete / inconsistent documentation being made available to the reviewers. SFI would like to emphasise that in all such cases a robust argument must be articulated and that the appeal will subsequently follow the specific procedures outlined in section 2.

It is appreciated that applicants may, from time to time, disagree with the detailed technical perspective of the expert referee, or their position on the overall quality or impact of the proposed research. However, SFI has full confidence in

the high quality of experts that it engages in the peer review process and takes the position that this source of expert input allows SFI to make the best and most informed decisions. The judgment, interpretation, or level of understanding of these experts is, therefore, not grounds for appeal.

SFI now has in place a formal process integrated into some of its programmes, whereby applicants are invited to provide a scientific response. In programmes where this response stage does not form part of the SFI review process, an appeal may be accepted where specific factual inaccuracies can be clearly identified. Otherwise, appeals must be limited to clearly identifiable issues of procedure. The process required for invoking the formal process of appeal is outlined in detail in section 2.

Regarding appeals made prior to full technical peer review of a proposal; SFI remains confident that the procedures for submission of Eols, pre-proposals and full proposals are clearly delineated in the call documentation and that it remains the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that these are followed correctly. For this reason, appeals based on applications that have been deemed administratively ineligible, including, but not restricted to, late applications, applications exceeding page limits or missing documentation, will not be considered unless it can be explicitly demonstrated that this resulted from an oversight by SFI.

Appeals based on funding levels, or award conditions on applications that have been approved for funding, will not be considered.

Award of SFI funding is discretionary and the appeal process is not an adversarial one. A formal hearing, therefore, is not provided. Factors such as programme budgets and priorities will have to be taken into account when making a decision on an appeal.

2. Procedures

The appeal process at SFI has three stages:

An applicant whose proposal has been declined is encouraged to request more information from the cognisant SFI Programme Manager, over and above the explanatory materials received with the declination notice. The Programme Manager will afford the applicant an opportunity to present his/her point of view, will provide additional information if any exists, and will take any further action that seems appropriate in consultation with the relevant SFI Scientific Director.

(A) REVIEW OF THE APPEAL BY AN SFI DIRECTOR NOT INVOLVED IN THE ORIGINAL REVIEW.

If dissatisfied with the explanation or action provided under Section (a), the

applicant may submit a written request to the Secretary to the SFI Board that SFI reconsider its decision. SFI will consider such a request only if the applicant has first sought and obtained an explanation under the procedures described in Section (a), only if the request is received by SFI within 30 days after the date of the declination notice, and provided that the applicant's request for an appeal has been sent through the research office of the applicant's host Research Body and is endorsed by the host Research Body (VP for research or equivalent). In the letter requesting the appeal, the applicant should state whether the appeal is based on a) factual inaccuracy (only applicable to awards that do not already include a rebuttal process) or b) procedural error. The applicant should also provide a concise written statement (no more than 300 words) clearly explaining the grounds for the appeal. The Secretary to the Board will forward the request to a Director at SFI who was not involved in the original review of the proposal. This Director will reconsider the record to determine whether SFI's review of the declined proposal was fair and reasonable. The Director may personally conduct the review or may designate a Programme Manager in his/her Programme area, who had no part in the initial review, to do so.

Within 30 days after the date of the request, the Director will provide the results of the appeal, in writing, to the research office of the host Research Body with a copy to the applicant. If the results cannot be furnished within 30 days, the allocated Director will give the host Research Body and the applicant a written explanation of the need for more time, indicating the date when results can be expected.

(B) FURTHER REVIEW BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL AT THE REQUEST OF THE HOST RESEARCH BODY.

Within 30 days after the Director has notified the applicant of the results of the appeal, the host Research Body may request further review by the Director General of SFI.

The request need not be in any particular format, but it must be in writing and must be signed by the President/Provost/Chief Executive Officer of the host Research Body and by the PI. The request should explain why the host Research Body still believes that an error may have occurred in the initial evaluation and why it is not satisfied with the review of the original appeal conducted by the Director under the procedures described in Section (b), above.

The Director General is responsible for reviewing the request for a further appeal and the record of earlier SFI actions (including the original review of the proposal and the review conducted under Section (b)). The Director General may personally conduct the further review or may designate another SFI official, who had no part in the original review or the review conducted under Section (b), to do

so. Additionally, an external third party expert(s) may be asked to examine the case and to present a recommendation. Within 30 days after a request for further appeal is received at SFI, the Director General will furnish the results of the further appeal, in writing, to the host Research Body. If results cannot be furnished within 30 days, the Director General will provide the host Research Body with a written explanation of the need for more time, indicating the date when the results can be expected.

THE DECISION MADE BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL IS FINAL

Performance Indicators

Priority-level Output Indicators Investment Priority 1(a)

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Fund	Category of Region	Target Value	Source of Data	Frequency of Reporting
CO	Number of new researchers	Full-Time Equivalent	ERDF	More Developed	689	SFI	Annual
1.1	Number of awards under the Spokes Programme in the S&E	Number of awards	ERDF	More Developed	25	SFI	Annual

Programme-Specific Result Indicators

Investment Priority 1(a)

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Category of Region	Baseline Value	Baseline Year	Target Value	Source of Data	Frequency of Reporting
1(a)	Increase number of industry partners engaged with funded strategic research centres	No. of enterprises	More Developed	529	2014	713	SFI	Annual

Financial Management.

Funding for SFI is provided by Central Government, and will be maintained under a separate Sub-head to be provided by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI), on an annual basis to SFI.

The “Finance and Operations” Unit of SFI will allocate funding on an instalment basis to the HEIs over the duration of the award. Such allocations will be made in line with the SFI awards selection criteria relevant to the specific programme and as detailed in the formal SFI “Letter of Offer” relating to the specific research award.

SFI will enter into an Administrative Agreement with the Regional Assembly which will set out in detail the responsibilities at each level in respect of financial management and control. SFI will supply the Beneficiary with a document setting out the conditions for support for each operation, including procedures to ensure beneficiaries maintain a separate accounting system or an adequate accounting code for all transactions relating to an operation.

The HEIs will submit to SFI details of their research project(s) and, as the project(s) progress, request their funding requirements in instalments for the duration of the research project. SFI will examine, validate and process such requests and will authorise the SFI Finance and Operations Unit to make the necessary payments, by electronic transfer, to the relevant HEI bank account.

The HEIs will provide as requested, detailed certification reports (B1’s) to SFI outlining eligible expenditure claimed. SFI will examine such reports and will from time to time carry out spot checks to verify actuality of expenditure claimed.

The books and accounts of the HEIs will be available on request for examination by SFI, the Managing Authority, the Certifying Authority, the Comptroller and Auditor General, the ERDF Financial Control Unit, the European Commission and the European Court of Auditors.

Document Retention.

In accordance with Article 140 of the Common Provisions Regulation (EC) 1303/2013 all supporting documents regarding expenditure, verification checks, certification and audits on operations for which total eligible expenditure is less than €1,000,000.00 will be kept available for the EU Commission and Court of Auditors for a period of three years from 31 December following the submission of the accounts in which the expenditure of the operation is included. In the case of operations over €1,000,000.00 all supporting documentation shall be kept for a 2 year period from 31 December following the submission of accounts in which the **final** expenditure of the completed operation is included.

Monitoring and Reporting Arrangements.

The reporting arrangements require that a progress report be submitted annually to the Monitoring Committee by the Intermediary Body in a format to be specified by the Committee. In addition, Intermediary Bodies will be required to provide data on the IT system which will be used to transfer information to the Commission. This system is currently being developed.

SFI will monitor the performance of the measure at Regional and National level and will report to the Regional Assembly in the matter. The HEIs will confirm in relation to each project that the agreed proposals have been implemented though it is recognised that the nature of the research awards means that some of the benefits to the region and nationally will be in the longer term.

On an annual basis SFI will compile reports on research project/Programme performance at intervention level, setting out progress against agreed intervention objectives and targets and performance on the horizontal principles as laid out in the reporting template. Progress reports will cover financial management details, performance indicators and qualitative information where appropriate. Given the nature of the SFI funding mechanism to HEIs, an annual report on expenditure incurred to date at research project level under the intervention will also be provided. SFI will agree the composition and format of these reports with the Managing Authority. The IT System will be used to report on the intervention and to transfer information on to the Commission, including information on operations as appropriate.

Information and Publicity.

SFI will ensure that the HEIs as beneficiaries will comply with section 2.2 of Annex XII of Commission Regulation 1303/2013 and with Articles 4 and 5 of Commission Implementing Regulation 821/2014.

The contribution of the Irish exchequer and the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 will be acknowledged in all promotional material, annual reports, research laboratories, websites, letters of offer etc., by use of appropriate logo and text references. The relevant Structural Funds regulations on Information and Publicity will be complied with in this regard.