



[REDACTED]

26 November 2020

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**Freedom of Information request: FOI2020/00325**

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on the 1 October in which you requested the following:

**Your request:**

*I would like information pertaining to:*

1. *The way in which assessors are selected and their expertise/credentials to review applications are vetted*
2. *How they are assigned to applications*
3. *The way in which assessors are briefed in relation to funding calls, as well as specifically in relation to the SIF SBRI call*
4. *How their assessments (across all calls) are checked for accuracy (both in relation to assessment against the scope of the call, as well as in relation to their assessment of a particular issue within an application) and how within a particular call those assessments are checked*
5. *How assessments within a call are moderated between sectors (recognising that assessors for any 2 particular applications may vary completely)*
6. *How assessments between calls and sectors are moderated*
7. *The legal structure under which the funding is awarded and the obligations under which Innovate UK awards that funding (e.g. obligations for accuracy, etc.)*
8. *The framework under which the SIF SBRI competition is held, the guidance given to assessors and the way in which the assessments are conducted and normalised across sectors, the way in which the core team ensures that the assessments are in accordance with the scope of the call*

*I'm looking for information, reports, guidance, briefings, processes, that are associated with preventing and correcting errors within the assessment process. Of particular interest is the way in which assessments are checked to verify they are conducted in accordance with the scope of the call.*

**Our response**

I can confirm UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) hold the information relevant to your request. Please see the information below.

We wrote to you on 28 October confirming that we held information in scope of your request but believed that some of the information may be exempt under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act and were considering the application of section 43(2) commercial prejudice. We have now completed our assessment and can confirm that some of the information does fall under the exemption specified and has been withheld. We are however releasing two documents *"FOI2020-00325 the Innovate UK Assessment Process – for assessors"* and *"FOI2020-00325 SIF SBRI Phase 1 Assessor Briefing 1.2.pdf."*

**1. The way in which assessors are selected and their expertise/credentials to review applications are vetted.**

Innovation/sector leads are responsible for the recruitment and selection of assessors for each competition. Selections are made based on the industry experience and expertise of assessors in any given area. Further information on the recruitment of assessors is provided in the attached document - *"FOI2020-00325 the Innovate UK Assessment Process – for assessors"*

**2. How they are assigned to applications.**

Assessors are allocated to applications via the Innovation Funding Service (IFS) dashboard which is an online system Innovate use for managing the application process. The assessors are matched with applications by our AI tool that checks the innovation area of the application and matches it with the skills and area of expertise of the assessors. Please refer to the attached document – *"FOI2020-00325 the Innovate UK Assessment Process – for assessors"*

**3. The way in which assessors are briefed in relation to funding calls, as well as specifically in relation to the SIF SBRI call.**

For Phase 1 of SBRI this involved an assessor briefing induction/webinar on 18<sup>th</sup> August, slides for which are attached. Please see the attached document, *"FOI2020-00325 SIF SBRI Phase 1 Assessor Briefing 1.2.pdf."* A small number of names have been redacted on page 2 of this document under section 40(2) of the FOIA. Section 40(2) exempts personal information such as names of individuals from disclosure if that information relates to someone other than the applicant, and if disclosure of that information would, amongst other things, contravene one of the data protection principles. Disclosing this information would contravene the first Data Protection Principle as defined under Section 86 of the Data Protection Act 2018 and Article 5 of EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016. Section 40(2) is an absolute exemption and does not require a public interest test.

Company details have also been exempted on pages 17, 24 and 25 of the same document *"FOI2020-00325 SIF SBRI Phase 1 Assessor Briefing 1.2.pdf"* under section 43(2) commercial prejudice. Section 43(2) is a qualified exemption, and we are required to carry out the public interest test in favour of or against releasing the information.

**Public interest in favour of disclosure**

- There is a public interest in transparency and accountability of public sector institutions and the way in which they spend public money.

**Public interest in favour of withholding the information**

- There is a public interest in protecting commercially sensitive information including business plans such as cost information, and technical project plans.
- This is confidential information and release would prejudice the operational success of the company.
- Release would also undermine the competitiveness of the company and hinder decision making.

Having considered the balance of the public interest in releasing and withholding the information we have concluded that the public interest in favour of maintaining the exemption at section 43(2) commercial prejudice outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

**4. How their assessments (across all calls) are checked for accuracy (both in relation to assessment against the scope of the call, as well as in relation to their assessment of a particular issue within an application) and how within a particular call those assessments are checked.**

We appoint 5 independent assessors, to ensure there is no biasness / anomalies in the assessment process. This is further supported by the moderation process and the funders panel review. All assessors are independent to Innovate UK and therefore the assessments are not individually checked once completed. The portfolio manager does however carry out a 10% spot check on all assessments completed to check for any anomalies. Please refer to the attached document – “FOI2020-00325 the Innovate UK Assessment Process – for assessors” for how applications are assessed.

**5. How assessments within a call are moderated between sectors (recognising that assessors for any 2 particular applications may vary completely)**

Applications are assessed by 3 to 5 independent assessors, they are then given a manual check to identify any potential outlier scores, the moderation would depend on the selection criteria of the call. If a portfolio approach is described within the brief, then the Innovation Leads would create their portfolio of projects based on scores and approach outlined in the brief. If there is no description or reference to a portfolio approach, then the projects would be funded based on a high scoring rank allocating funds as they are exhausted.

**6. How assessments between calls and sectors are moderated**

Please see answer to question to Q5.

**7. The legal structure under which the funding is awarded and the obligations under which Innovate UK awards that funding (e.g. obligations for accuracy, etc.).**

UK Research and Innovation was established and awards funding based on the criteria laid out in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017<sup>1</sup>. Innovate UK adheres to the relevant guidelines set out there as well as awarding under State Aid<sup>2</sup> legislation. We also follow the guidance laid out in Managing Public Money<sup>3</sup> and Government Grants Functional Standards<sup>4</sup>. As this information is in the public domain, under Section 21 - Information already reasonably accessible, of the FOIA we have provided the links above. Section 21 is an absolute exemption which means that there is no requirement to conduct a public interest test.

**8. The framework under which the SIF SBRI competition is held, the guidance given to assessors and the way in which the assessments are conducted and normalised across sectors, the way in which the core team ensures that the assessments are in accordance with the scope of the call.**

The SIF SBRI competition is held according to the framework and guidance below which defines the programme and the responsibility of applicants. Please note that Innovate UK is in the process of updating its policies.

The framework under which the SIF SBRI competition is held is as follows:

**About Small Business Research Initiative competitions**

SBRI provides innovative solutions to challenges faced by the public sector. This can lead to better public services and improved efficiency and effectiveness.

**The SBRI programme:**

- Supports economic growth and enables the development of innovative products and services through the public procurement of R&D
- Generates new business opportunities for companies
- Provides a route to market for their ideas
- Bridges the seed funding gap experienced by many early-stage companies

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/innovation-apply-for-a-funding-award#state-aid>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-public-money>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/grants-standards>

- SBRI competitions are open to all organisations that can demonstrate a route to market for their solution. The SBRI scheme is particularly suited to small and medium-sized businesses, as the contracts are of relatively small value and operate on short timescales. Developments are 100% funded and focused on specific identified needs, increasing the chance of exploitation.
- Suppliers for each project will be selected by an open competition process and retain the intellectual property generated from the project, with certain rights of use retained by the contracting authority. This is an excellent opportunity to establish an early customer for a new technology and to fund its development.

By submitting this application, you acknowledge that:

- You have read the statement above
- You have read the draft contract and are prepared to agree to the terms and conditions if you are successful.
- You agree that your contact details can be passed to other government agencies and Affinity Partners.
- The information given in this application is complete.
- You are actively engaged in this project and responsible for its overall management.
- You agree to administer the award if made.

### About the Sustainable Innovation Fund

The coronavirus (COVID 19) pandemic has resulted in an unexpected and unparalleled disruption to UK jobs, businesses, the economy at large and society in general. Recovering will take considerable time and investment, but the opportunity exists to recover in a sustainable way, resulting in increased prosperity with lower carbon emissions.

In relation to part two of this question, we can confirm that the guidance for assessors is written by the Innovation Lead in charge of the competition. We have a general set of guidance templates in IFS that are rolled out for each competition and providing that competition is standard, this guidance will not change. However, if the competition is run in a different way, as SBRI competitions are with them being contracts, the Innovation Lead would tailor the guidance to correspond to the questions being asked. Please refer to the attached document "*FOI2020-00325 SIF SBRI Phase 1 Assessor Briefing 1.2.pdf*" which provides further information on the guidance provided to assessors.

If you have any queries regarding our response or you are unhappy with the outcome of your request and wish to seek an internal review of the decision, please contact:

Head of Information Governance

Email: [foi@ukri.org](mailto:foi@ukri.org) or [infogovernance@ukri.org](mailto:infogovernance@ukri.org)

Please quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are still not content with the outcome of the internal review, you may apply to refer the matter to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the review procedure provided by UKRI. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: <http://www.ico.gov.uk/>

If you wish to raise a complaint regarding the service you have received or the conduct of any UKRI staff in relation to your request, please see UKRI's complaints policy: <https://www.ukri.org/about-us/policies-and-standards/complaints-policy/>

Yours sincerely,

  
Information Governance

Information Rights Team

UK Research and Innovation

[foi@ukri.org](mailto:foi@ukri.org) | [dataprotection@ukri.org](mailto:dataprotection@ukri.org)

UK Research and Innovation, Polaris House, North Star Avenue, Swindon SN2 1FL

[www.ukri.org](http://www.ukri.org)