



[REDACTED]

15 February 2024

Dear [REDACTED],

Freedom of Information request: FOI2023/00931

Thank you for your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request received on the 21 November in which you requested the following:

Your request:

- 1. Please tell us how applicants were invited (open process: e.g. public call; or closed process: e.g. pre-selected individuals/organisation) to apply for the UKRI's £10 million funding designated for the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre (MSPEC).*
- 2. Please share names of the individuals or entities who applied for the UKRI's £10 million funding for MSPEC.*
- 3. Please provide details on the assessment or evaluation methods employed by UKRI before allocating £10 million funding to support the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre (MSPEC).*
- 4. Please provide all publicly disclosable documentation associated with the application process and formal proposal to the Strategic Priorities Fund which resulted in the approval of UKRI funding to support the establishment of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre.*
- 5. Please confirm the specific format of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre proposal, the length of the proposal, the named applicants, and the specific bodies/committees within UKRI which were ultimately responsible for evaluating and approving the application for establishing the Evidence Centre. Please share all publicly disclosable documentation peer-review documentation associated with the decision to provide funding for the Evidence Centre.*
- 6. Please confirm whether usual UKRI protocols and procedures (e.g. a publicly circulated call for applications, an open competition amongst multiple applicants, and formal selection criteria which were applied equally to all applicants) were followed when a decision was made to provide UKRI funding for the Modern Slavery Evidence Centre.*

Our response

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

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre was funded from the Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF). The SPF was an £830 million investment that was part of the National Productivity Investment Fund. The SPF fund has supported 34 multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research and innovation programmes, and had three objectives:

- Drive an increase in high-quality multi- and inter-disciplinary research and innovation;

- Ensure that UKRI's investment links up effectively with Government Departmental research and innovation priorities and opportunities; and
- Ensure the system is able to respond to strategic priorities and opportunities.

The SPF was open to the nine [UKRI councils](#) and the following non-UKRI bodies: UK Space Agency, UK Atomic Energy Authority, National Physical Laboratory, National Nuclear Laboratory, Met Office and Government Office for Science. Funding was allocated across two waves.

The process of selection of the SPF's 34 constituent programmes was managed by UKRI. Proposals for programmes which met the objectives of the SPF were assessed by a fund-level assessment panel which scrutinised the bids against set criteria. Proposals which were successful at this stage were given an in-principle agreement that allocation of funding to the programme from the SPF could proceed once the programme went through business case assurance via business as usual processes for the organisation leading the bid (in the case of MSPEC this was the Arts and Humanities Research Council – AHRC, which is part of UKRI).

1. *Please tell us how applicants were invited (open process: e.g. public call; or closed process: e.g. pre-selected individuals/organisation) to apply for the UKRI's £10 million funding designated for the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre (MSPEC).*

The MSPEC proposal was formulated by AHRC following workshops convened with members of both the research community and other interested stakeholders in 2018. This followed confirmation that Modern Slavery was an area of research interest for the government and funding such areas of research interest was an objective of the SPF. The consortium was formed from workshop participants, with roles and areas of interest distributed by AHRC owing to appetite, availability and specialism.

2. *Please share names of the individuals or entities who applied for the UKRI's £10 million funding for MSPEC.*

Named in the original bid are the following:

- Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law (Director/Chair) - Murray Hunt
- University of Liverpool
- University of Nottingham
- University of Oxford
- University of Hull
- Alan Turing Institute

3. *Please provide details on the assessment or evaluation methods employed by UKRI before allocating £10 million funding to support the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre (MSPEC).*

- The Policy and Evidence Centre for Modern Slavery and Human Rights programme bid was put together by AHRC, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, also part of UKRI), and the Home Office. The original bid submitted by AHRC to the Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF) Wave 2 bidding process was for £18.95m over 5 years.
- The SPF Wave 2 panel, with expert membership drawn from across government and UKRI including three independent members, were responsible for reviewing the bid against the SPF selection criteria.
- Panel recommendations (including the reduction of programme cost to £10m) were submitted to the UKRI Executive Committee for approval, followed by the UKRI Board.
- Final sign-off to begin each wave of the SPF was via a fund-level business case to the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS, which is now the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, DSIT) and HM Treasury outlining how the portfolio selected under each wave would deliver on the expected fund-level objectives, and was a parallel process.

- Individual programmes went through a separate business case approval process based on level of delegated authority through HMT, BEIS and UKRI (as detailed at Figure 1 below).
- This separate business case approval process was based on the level of delegated authority throughout BEIS and its arms length bodies (including UKRI). The exception to this was where there were multiple councils in receipt of SPF funding under the £20m delegated authority of an individual UKRI Executive Chairs. In this instance the decision was then passed to the UKRI Chief Finance Officer for review and sign-off.
- Once all clearance steps had passed, programmes could start.

4. *Please provide all publicly disclosable documentation associated with the application process and formal proposal to the Strategic Priorities Fund which resulted in the approval of UKRI funding to support the establishment of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre.*

Information related to the formal proposal and documentation associated with the application process is being withheld under section 43(2), commercial prejudice, of the FOIA. This exemption is relevant where disclosure would likely result in a person's (an individual, a company, the public authority itself or any other legal entities) commercial interests being prejudiced. The exemption relates to any material where disclosure would give a commercial or competitive disadvantage. This is a qualified exemption, meaning that a public interest test was carried out to determine whether the public interest outweighs the requirement for commercial confidentiality.

Public interest in favour of disclosure

- There is a general public interest in the disclosure of this information to ensure transparency and openness of a public organisation.
- There is also a public interest in transparency in order to ensure the accountability of public organisations and how they spend public funding.

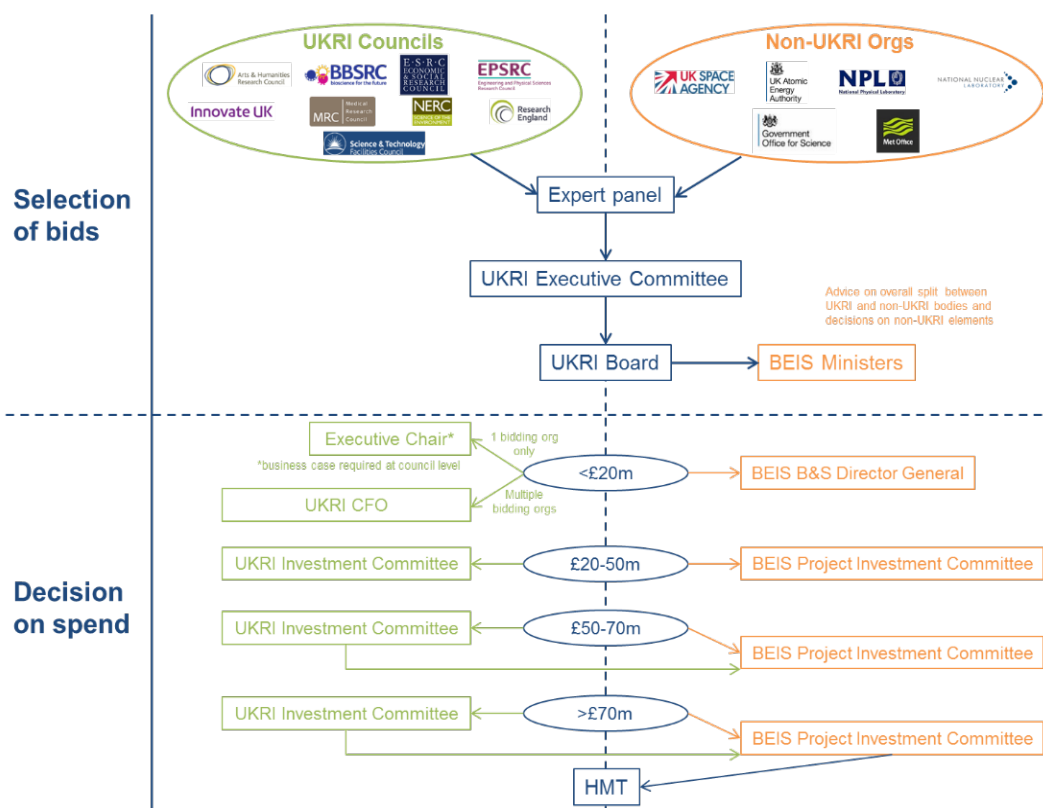
Public interest in favour of withholding the information

- There is a public interest in protecting commercially sensitive information such as funding or bid proposals. This is confidential information and release would prejudice UKRI's capacity to successfully attract organisations to participate in any future SPF-like processes.
- The information requested contains commercially sensitive information such as funding profiles and breakdown of costs, governance and delivery structure, technical and extensive descriptions of the project and the approach proposed, all of which were disclosed to UKRI in confidence.
- Releasing information provided in confidence to UKRI is likely to damage the possibility of ongoing relationships with other organisations. Relationships may become untenable if third parties cannot be certain that their commercial information will remain confidential when held by UKRI.
- We also considered the impact on UKRI if commercially sensitive information of organisations we engage and work closely with were disclosed. We believe it would damage the trust in UKRI and likely impact our ability to carry out our role and manage our current and future investments.

Taking the above arguments into consideration, we reached the decision that the need for commercial confidentiality outweighs the public interest in disclosure; therefore the information is exempt from disclosure.

The application process followed the steps indicated below:

Figure 1: SPF application process



5. Please confirm the specific format of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre proposal, the length of the proposal, the named applicants, and the specific bodies/committees within UKRI which were ultimately responsible for evaluating and approving the application for establishing the Evidence Centre. Please share all publicly disclosable documentation peer-review documentation associated with the decision to provide funding for the Evidence Centre.

The proposal followed the format of the bidding template for the SPF Wave 2 and comprised 12 pages. Named applicants are provided at question 2 above. Bodies/committees responsible for evaluating and approving the application are depicted in Figure 1 above.

In relation to the peer review documentation, we consider this information is exempt under section 41, information provided in confidence, of the FOIA. To explain further, UKRI undertakes to keep confidential all information in relation to a grant proposal, including peer review information. In relation to the UKRI grants process, applications or bid proposals are submitted to UKRI in confidence with the understanding that the evaluation and assessment process will be carried out with the same degree of confidence.

Under these circumstances peer reviewers or bid evaluators and applicants would expect the peer review documentation and proposals to remain confidential. This information is more than trivial and not otherwise accessible, as it refers to the specific evaluation of a particular project and is information that is not publicly available and not easily accessible. We believe that, at present, the information has the necessary quality of confidence and was imparted under an obligation of confidence. As this exemption is absolute there is no requirement to conduct a public interest test.

6. Please confirm whether usual UKRI protocols and procedures (e.g. a publicly circulated call for applications, an open competition amongst multiple applicants, and formal selection criteria which were applied equally to all applicants) were followed when a decision was made to provide UKRI funding for the Modern Slavery Evidence Centre.

Please see the response to question 1. We can confirm that UKRI protocols and procedures for SPF funding were followed when a decision was made to provide funding to MSPEC. These protocols and procedures were specific to SPF.

As part of our duty to provide advice and assistance under the FOIA we can advise that UKRI is committed to publishing information about the projects it funds on Gateway to Research. Information on the [MSPEC](#)¹ is available at the link provided.

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 within the next 40 working days:

Head of Information Governance


Email: foi@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: www.ico.org.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 | dataprotection@ukri.org

¹ <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FT012412%2F1>