

## Astronomy Small Award Research Grant Application Guidelines – 2025

### Introduction

The purpose of these notes is to provide guidance and instructions to Applicants when preparing a Small Award application for consideration by the Astronomy Grants Panel (AGP). They are intended to supplement the information available in the STFC [guidance for applicants](#) and on the UKRI Funding Service.

The notes provide guidance on the following:

1. Eligibility to Apply to the 2025 Small Awards Round
2. Aims of the Scheme
3. Small Award Remit
4. Timetable
5. Applying through the UKRI Funding Service
6. Small Award Scope and Requesting Resources
7. Required information and structure
8. How will we assess your application – Peer Review
9. Additional Information

### 1. Eligibility to Apply to the 2025 Small Awards Round

Applicants may submit up to two applications to the Small Award round, only one of which can be as the Project Lead (previously principal investigator), subject to the 2025 eligibility for PLs. Applicants must adhere to the FTE limits as per the guidance in section 6.

Applicants are eligible to apply as a PL to the Small Award scheme in 2025 if they satisfy one of the following criteria:

- you applied to the 2022 consolidated/consortium grant round and would be due to submit in 2025.
- you applied to the 2023 Small Award scheme but were unsuccessful
- you have not applied to an astronomy grants scheme before but satisfy the general UKRI eligibility criteria

Project Co-Lead (previously Co-Investigator) eligibility is open to all applicants, providing the Project Lead is eligible to apply as per the conditions above.

Applications to the Small Award scheme are welcome from both single research organisations or multiple research organisation consortiums.

You are not eligible to apply if:

- you are a project lead on a currently funded Small Award and the funding would overlap
- you applied as a project lead in the 2024 Small Awards round and your application was unsuccessful

If you are unsure of your eligibility to apply please contact the STFC Office ([chloe.woodcock@stfc.ukri.org](mailto:chloe.woodcock@stfc.ukri.org) and [kim.burchell@stfc.ukri.org](mailto:kim.burchell@stfc.ukri.org))

Applicants should note that the Small Award and Large Award schemes are decoupled; a submission to either scheme will not affect the eligibility to apply to the other.

## 2. Aims of the Small Award scheme

The specific aims of the scheme are to:

- Ensure that the programme supported is scientifically excellent and is clearly in line with stated Council strategic science objectives.
- Consider the strategic objectives of the UK Space Agency, address the impact agenda and be responsive to changes and new ideas.
- Ensure that the process is transparent and accountable, particularly with respect to the means of prioritisation.
- Ensure that the outcome, where appropriate, takes account of the Council's and the UK Space Agency's current and planned investment in facilities.
- Ensure that there is an appropriate balance between observations, instrumentation, and theory and between the various sub-disciplines of astronomy and the development of novel, generic technologies for astronomy and space science, consistent with the overall strategy of Council and the UK Space Agency.

## 3. Small Award Remit

The Astronomy Grants Panel (AGP) will assess and provide recommendations to the STFC Executive and the Discovery Advisory Committee for Science (DACs) of the UK Space Agency (UKSA), under the dual key arrangement, on all responsive research grant applications in astronomy and space science covering basic research, exploitation, theory and modelling, and the development of basic ('blue skies') technology (TRL 1-4) related to the programme.

The AGP will comprise experts to cover all science areas of the programme and provide an overview of the process and programme to ensure support is provided to research of the highest quality across the science programme. Sub-Panels of appropriate experts from the AGP will meet to assess each proposal that falls within their remit and to provide input to the overall recommendation. The remit of each Sub-Panel is given in the details of the calls described below and should be referred to prior to submitting an application. The AGP will review the output of the meetings and draw up final recommendations to be submitted to the STFC Science Board (PPAN) and to UKSA DACs.

### Research Remit of Small Awards

The AGP offers two opportunities for small award applications. The same deadline applies to both. The remits of these opportunities are set out below: if Applicants have any doubt about which opportunity a particular application should be submitted to, they are strongly encouraged to discuss this with the STFC Office as soon as possible. Applications judged by the Panel to be submitted to the wrong opportunity will be **REJECTED**.

**Applicants are advised that the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding service does not have the functionality to return applications for amendment. If you do not follow the remit guidance, submit to the wrong opportunity, or fail to follow the page limits/font type/FTE rules, your application will be rejected and you will not be able to submit a revised version to the 2025 opportunity.**

Applicants can submit a maximum of two applications per round (spanning both opportunity remits); only one can be as the Project Lead (subject to the 2025 project lead eligibility criteria listed above).

### **Astronomy Observation (AO) and Astronomy Theory (AT) Opportunity**

This opportunity covers theory, including modelling, simulation and related software development, observation, experiment and new technology research, relevant to all aspects of astronomy and astrophysics beyond the solar system. This includes:

- Stellar physics, including star formation and extra-solar planetary systems (studies of the Sun as part of a programme of stellar physics may fit here).
- Studies of transient phenomena.
- The interstellar medium and galactic astronomy.
- Extra-galactic astronomy and cosmology.
- The astrophysical aspects of particle astrophysics, where particle astrophysics includes dark matter, the origin of cosmic rays and gravity.
- Blue skies technology/instrumentation development applicable to the above areas (TRL 1-4).
- Laboratory astrophysics, including software development, relevant to the above programmes.

### **Solar Studies (SS) and Planetary Studies (PL) Opportunity**

This opportunity covers theory, including modelling, simulation and related software development, observation, experiment and new technology research, relevant to all aspects of solar system science. This includes:

- Solar physics and heliospheric physics.
- Space-based terrestrial magnetospheric science and fundamental space plasma physics (excluding the impact on the Earth's neutral atmosphere).
- Planetary science, including the surfaces and interiors, atmospheres, ionospheres, and magnetospheres of the solar system bodies other than the Earth.
- Studies of other solar system bodies including comets, asteroids, meteorites, etc.
- Laboratory studies of solar system material such as meteorites, returned samples, solar system analogues, other laboratory physics relevant to the area of the call and related software development.
- Blue skies technology/instrumentation development applicable to the above areas (TRL 1-4).

**If your application is in one of the following research areas we strongly advise you contact the STFC Office to check the remit ahead of submitting:**

**Technology Development** - The AGP will consider funding astronomy and space science applications within technology readiness levels (TRL) 1 to 4 or their equivalent ([Eligibility of technology readiness levels \(TRL\) – UKRI](#)). Applications which seek to move from TRL 4 to TRL 5 during the timeline of the proposed award are out of remit. Modest upgrades to existing equipment, related to the delivery of science within the course of the project requested, may be considered. Telescope/instrument operations costs, where not directly linked to specific science outcomes within the grant period, are not within the remit.

The UKSA will consider space mission-related applications at TRL 5 and above.

**Gravitational Wave Research** - The AGP will consider funding support for some aspects of gravitational wave research: [Clarification of STFC Support for Gravitational Waves Research – UKRI](#).

**Space Weather and the Impact of the Sun on Terrestrial Systems** – STFC will support non-Earth-orientated solar-terrestrial physics research e.g., fundamental space plasma physics not related to the Earth. STFC will also fund the primary exploitation of space-based facilities (spacecraft and

instruments) for solar terrestrial physics.

NERC is responsible for funding solar terrestrial physics where the primary goal is to understand the Earth's environment from the deep interior to the upper atmosphere (i.e., mesosphere, thermosphere and ionosphere).

**Mars Exploration and Sample Return** - Studies related to the UKSA's programme of Aurora science (Mars exploration and sample return) should be addressed to the UKSA [spaxexploration@ukspaceagency.gov.uk](mailto:spaxexploration@ukspaceagency.gov.uk) in the first instance, as separate funding may be available.

#### 4. Timetable

Date:	Action:
4 March (4pm)	Deadline for submission of Small Award applications
April/May	Expert Peer Review
June/July	Applicants to respond to reviewer comments
September	Peer Review Panel Meetings
October	Science Board and UK Space Agency endorsement
November	Outcome Announced

#### 5. Applying through the UKRI Funding Service

Please see the detailed 'how to apply' guidance available on the funding finder page. Further guidance on the UKRI Funding Service is also available at the following link: [How applicants use the UKRI Funding Service – UKRI](#).

If you are submitting as a multiple organisation consortium, only the lead research organisation can submit an application to UKRI.

#### 6. Small Award Scope and Requesting Resources

The AGP considers applications which are wide-ranging in the level of resources requested, and would expect to see specific, explicit and compelling justification for all requests. The lack of a compelling justification will have a negative impact on the assessment of the application and may lead to the application being **REJECTED**.

Applicants are advised we will no longer be providing a suggested guideline cost for RIA/Applicant/visiting researcher travel, computing, secretarial or computing support. Applicants can still request these costs but should consult the links provided below and request/justify what is required to support the project.

Computing officer support and administrative support must be fully justified and must be providing project-specific support. The applicants must clearly explain and justify why such support cannot be provided from indirect costs. The lack of a compelling justification will have a negative impact on the assessment of the application.

Applications to the Small Awards opportunity must contain a single project (requests for multi-project small awards will be rejected) which must follow the resource guidance below:

- 3 years maximum in duration, all awards must start on 01/04/2025.
- Maximum of 1FTE per year of research and innovation associate (previously PDRA). The panel recognises that technical or lab-based applications may require fractions of the time of specialist research and innovation associates, but this should not exceed the overall envelope of one FTE per year.
- Maximum 0.2FTE of combined Applicant time for a single application. The project lead (PL) is expected to request a minimum of 0.10FTE to lead and manage the project. Please note the 0.2FTE cap includes applicants contributing at zero salary cost. You are not permitted to include additional applicants over the 0.2FTE cap even if they are working at zero cost.
- An individual Applicant is NOT permitted to request more than 0.2FTE (costed or uncosted) across applications submitted within the round.
- There may also occasionally be applications which involve only applicant-only time or applicant plus technician time.
- There is no limit on technician FTE but this must be project specific and justified within the resources and costs section.

Researcher co-leads are permitted on awards but must be counted within the FTE limits above (either within the RIA limit or the Applicant FTE limit). Please read the [guidance](#) for the eligibility of a researcher co-lead before applying for this role type.

STFC permits applications from applicants who have been successful in securing funding from other sources. **However, it is the Applicants' responsibility to demonstrate to the Panel that the programme to be carried out in the Small Award is clearly distinct from the remit of their existing support. Please ensure you provide this justification within the current support section.**

### **Requesting Staff Posts**

**Applicant Time (FTE)** – please refer to the guidance [Investigator posts – UKRI](#)

- The PL would be expected to request a minimum of 0.10 FTE for their scientific contribution, oversight of the project, and management/supervision of any personnel involved.
- Any additional applicant FTE: This should be identifiable against specific tasks extending throughout the duration for which the FTE support is requested. The panel must be able to understand from the proposal why an FTE request is necessary and appropriate for the project's success.

### **Requesting Applicant time but with zero salary costs**

Applicants who are not requesting a salary contribution may request project-specific support costs such as travel/subsistence or other directly incurred costs. Applicants **MUST** make it clear whether Estates and Indirect costs have been included in the request.

**Requesting Un-named Research Staff and Named Research Staff (PDRA posts)** – please refer to the Grants handbook [Research Staff](#).

**Technical and Other Staff** – please refer to the Grants handbook ([Other staff – UKRI](#))

**Please note that requests for studentships are not eligible within the Small Awards Scheme.**

**Applicants can also request and make the case for the following project specific costs:**

- Travel and Subsistence ([Travel and subsistence – UKRI](#))
- Directly Incurred ([Other costs – UKRI](#))
- Directly Allocated Other Costs ([Other costs – UKRI](#))
- Equipment ([Equipment – UKRI](#))

The Research Organisation is expected to provide standard laptop or desktops from Indirect costs. Laptops may only be costed to the application where a higher specification of laptop is required for the completion of specific grant-related activities such as data modelling, enhanced graphics, etc.

Computing officer support and administrative support must be fully justified and must be providing project-specific support. The applicants must clearly explain and justify why such support cannot be provided from indirect costs. The lack of a compelling justification will have a negative impact on the assessment of the application.

Please note that any Personal Costs requested (e.g., relocation, visa fee and NHS surcharge costs, etc.) should only be included where it is known that they will be required and not as a contingency for any posts that will need to be recruited for. Please see [Other costs – UKRI for further information](#).

Applications may include costs for reasonable adjustments. Where an application includes costs for reasonable adjustment, UKRI will ensure they are eligible, and these should be accepted without comment. Further information on disability and accessibility support for UKRI applicants during the application and assessment process can be found [here](#).

## **7. Required Information and Structure**

The UKRI Funding Service requests information in a box/question set format. Please follow the guidance available on the UKRI Finding Finder for the relevant Small Award opportunity:

**Failure to comply with the requested information/format and page limits will result in the application being rejected.**

## **8. How will we assess your application – Peer Review**

STFC is committed to the UKRI [Principles of Peer Review](#) throughout our assessment and decision-making processes.

The AGP Small Award assessment criteria are as follows (please be advised the first three categories have the higher weighting in the assessment process):

- Vision
- Approach
- Applicant and team capability to deliver
- Resources and cost justification
- Risk management
- Ethics and responsible research and innovation (RRI)

### **Reviewer Comments**

We will invite two to three UK and international experts to review your application. You will then be given the opportunity to respond to comments.

### **Applicant response to Reviewer comments**

Applicants will be given the opportunity to respond to reviewer comments via the UKRI Funding Service. Your response is limited to 500 words per review received, you can use this limit as you deem appropriate (for example you may wish to use more words on one reviewer over another).

**Applicants are strongly advised to be clear and concise in their response.** You should ensure that you use this opportunity to highlight any areas of agreement or disagreement with reviewers, factual errors or misunderstandings about the application, clarify issues raised and answer questions posed by reviewers. The response is not intended to provide an opportunity to change finances or re-write the application. The response should be returned within 10 working days of receipt

### **Peer Review Meetings**

The AGP is a peer review assessment Panel. It will consider the information provided in the application, as well as the reviewer comments and any applicant response to reviewer comments, in its assessment of your application.

The AGP comprises four Sub-Panels of experts covering the following four broad science areas within Astronomy:

AGP: AO - Astronomy Observations

AGP: AT – Astronomy Theory

AGP: SS – Solar Studies & Space-based Solar Terrestrial Physics

AGP: PL – Planetary Studies

In addition, a Technology Sub-Panel provides expertise to the AGP to appropriately tension technology and exploitation/theory projects. Details of Panel membership can be found at [AGP Panel Members](#).

The AGP is committed to supporting the recommendations and principles set out by the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#) (DORA). We do not use journal-based metrics, such as journal impact factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles when assessing proposals.

### **Post-meetings / Communicating Outcomes**

The AGP Chair will report to STFC Science Board (PPAN) and to the UKSA DACS on the recommended outcome for the round. The final funding line will be determined by the STFC budget holder, after which Applicants will be informed of the outcome with appropriate feedback. We aim to communicate outcomes and provide feedback by November.

### **Future Submissions to the Small Award Scheme**

If you are unsuccessful applying as a project lead in the 2025 Small Award round you will not be eligible to apply to the 2026 Small Award round as a project lead. You would next be eligible to submit as a PL to the 2027 Small Award round.

If you are successful in securing funding as a PL in the 2025 Small Award round then you cannot apply again for a Small Award as project lead for funding which would overlap your award.

If your application was unsuccessful in securing funding, we will not permit the same application to be submitted in the subsequent year with different applicant roles assigned (e.g., a role reversal between project lead and project co-lead).

## **9. Additional information**

### **Contacts**

Senior Programme Manager, Astronomy Awards - [Chloe.Woodcock@stfc.ukri.org](mailto:Chloe.Woodcock@stfc.ukri.org)

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### **Useful Links**

[Peer review and assessment](#)

[Equality and Diversity](#)

[Researchfish - Reporting Outcomes](#)

[Impact Guidance](#)