Q1: Regarding eligibility to apply and Demand Management
a) Will any application to this call or Standards count towards our submissions for the July 2020 deadline? Yes, this includes any submission from an Early Career Researcher (ECR) or an established PI, both will count towards the July 2020 submissions (so organisations with a quota of one cannot submit to both).
b) Will the success of an application to this call affect our Demand Management quota? Yes, submissions to (and success in) both Pushing the Frontiers and Standards contribute collectively to quotas. If your organisation’s quota is one, you can only submit one to either the pilot call or the Standards call. If your organisation’s quota is two or more, and you want to submit two to the pilot call then one must be from an ECR. See the Announcement of Opportunity, Annex A, section on ‘Eligibility’.
c) If my organisation has Demand Management set to one application, should an application to this call come from an ECR or an established PI? The application could come from either an ECR or an established PI (or neither if you want to submit to the Discovery Science Standard Grant call).
d) Can the same PI submit both a Standard application and a Pushing the Frontiers application into the same Demand Management round? No, the PI is limited to leading up to one application across both calls. The PI can, however, be a Co-I on a Standards application and be a PI on a Pushing the Frontiers application in the same round.
e) Will applications be welcomed from PIs who are based at independent research organisations not universities? This call is open to all UK organisations that are eligible for NERC funding so yes.
f) Are there any resubmission rules for this call? This is in terms of any rules which would prevent me from using a reworked proposal from a different scheme to be submitted here. No, there are no rules on this for this call. By the nature of it, the reworked proposal will have to be very differently written and framed so it would be accepted.

Q2: Regarding ECRs
a) Would a temporary postdoc position be considered a permanent position for an ECR? No. There must be a permanent post (at least in principle) otherwise it would not be considered. The post also needs to be at a level for which the individual is eligible to apply as a PI for NERC grants (lecturer level or equivalent).
b) Would a probationary contract be considered a permanent contract? If an individual is under a probationary period of a permanent contract, they could apply and if they failed to pass their probation period during the assessment period, the proposal would need to be withdrawn. However, if an organisation considered that the individual was strong enough to be submitting a proposal to this call, it is unlikely they would not pass probation. Any contract should not be dependent on being successful with this proposal.
c) Could an individual who is in the early stages of their fellowship (but with an in principal offer of a position) apply? If someone has a fellowship which fully funds them, you would expect them to be in a better position to apply for this later in their fellowship (should there be further calls).
individual in the final year of their fellowship, who has been offered a permanent position at the end of the fellowship, might be in a good position to apply for this call. Fellows might be better applying for a Discovery Science Standard Grant or a directed call in the earlier stages of their fellowship. We are expecting these grants to start by April next year, so there may be a small overlap between a fellowship ending and this award starting.

d) If my position was made permanent during my IRF, and this was more than 5 years, can I still apply? Yes. The five years should start once the applicant moves from their IRF or equivalent fellowship into their academic post. We don’t want to disadvantage those IRFs/fellows that are made permanent earlier in the fellowship by their employing RO. If you are not sure, please get in touch (pushingfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org).

e) If I work for an organisation where there is a less clear step from a fixed term position (postdoc or fellowship) to a permanent academic position (normally lecturer), can I still apply? Yes, the five-year window would normally start from when you are considered to have an equivalent position to a lectureship and can first apply for NERC grants. If any organisations, or individuals, are not sure if they meet the ECR status then they should contact the NERC office. Organisations can submit a maximum of two proposals to this call if one is from an ECR and if they have a quota of two or more, so we want to work with organisations to ensure they can submit their most exceptional early career researcher and established individuals. Please contact pushingfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org.

f) Can an ECR apply if they name an organisation that will only employ the ECR subject to being successful? No, on two grounds. First, their permanent role must not be dependent on getting this award. Second, this isn’t a fellowship so they would already need to be employed by that RO and be in a position that they were eligible to apply for research grants.

g) Given it might take academics many years to find a permanent position, the applicants to this scheme could be either recently graduated academics or they could be 10-15 years post-PhD. How will this difference be weighted? In reality, someone who has taken many years to get their first permanent position might be less competitive than an exceptional candidate coming straight out of a fellowship. There will also be variation in the experience and career stage of established researchers, but we can only have two initial sift panels split by ECR and Established researcher.

h) Can individuals holding a ERC/Royal Society or other fellowship/grant apply to Pushing the Frontiers? Individuals can apply if they are committed for no more than 60% of their time on other grants/fellowships, and if they are within 5 years of the start of the equivalent of an academic post (with other support from the RO for the rest of their time). This is because they need to be able to devote at least 40% of their time to the PtF award. If an individual is fully funded on other grants/fellowships (or committed more than 60% on any grants), assuming they are still within 5 years of the start of an academic post, then they can apply for a Pushing the Frontiers grant if their other commitment reduces below 60% by the time the Pushing the Frontiers grant would start.

i) Would UKRI Fellows (David Phillips, Future Leader, NERC, etc) be eligible as ECR Fellows if they are on a tenure-track position? How would the 40% allocation of time work given the fellowship guidelines? The answer to this depends on the scheme. For further information, please contact pushingfrontiers@nerc.ukri.org.

Q3: Regarding international collaborators

a) Can individuals from outside the UK take part in this call? International researchers and collaborators could be involved in successful projects, and would be a Project Partner and would not receive funds from the grant (except for limited incidental expenses and approved exceptions – IIASA). Project partners can come from any country and be involved in a project if they are fundamental to the research. Brief details on the project partners can be included in the case for support. We emphasise that we do not need to know exactly who the collaborators will be.
b) Can I list Co-Is from the USA and have potential co-funding under the NERC-NSF agreement? There should be no Co-Is named in the JeS Proforma. Likely collaborators can be mentioned in the case for support only. The focus of the assessment process is on the PI. Upon award the normal funding rules apply so the grant can only fund eligible organisations and individuals. The NSF/NERC Lead Agency Agreement is not possible under this pilot call. If you want to go through a route which allows the NSF/NERC Lead Agency Agreement, you would need to submit to the Standards call and not this pilot.

c) Can overseas collaborators be costed into my project? Following the normal NERC rules on project partners, they will not be able to receive funding directly from the award. Minor Directly Incurred costs may be requested to facilitate collaboration. Please note, academic collaborators cannot be subcontractors. Sub-contractors must be purely providing a service (find more details in the NERC Research Grants Handbook under ‘Sub-contracting’).

Q4: Regarding the remit of this call
a) Can applications include content which falls outside the NERC scientific remit? Yes, but the project must continue to be > 50% environmental research. NERC welcomes applications which include innovative research which crosses any of the UKRI Research Council remits and are interdisciplinary. Remit enquiries can be sent to nercremit@nerc.ukri.org and see more detail at: https://nerc.ukri.org/funding/available/researchgrants/crosscouncil/

b) Is there a specific environmental focus for applications? No, this is an open call. You can submit ideas from any area relevant to the remit of NERC.

c) How applied can applications be? This is a call for curiosity-drive research. It can include some more applied research but your project must be ground-breaking and innovative.

d) Would a proposal focusing on an emerging research field, and led by a PI who is working outside their usual areas of curiosity, be considered risky? Not in itself - the project must be ground-breaking and innovative, and the PI must have the skills and track record to lead the project.

e) Can my proposal be dominated by modelling over experimental research? Yes, but you still must illustrate that your project can be ground-breaking and innovative.

f) Is there any advantage if my proposal aligns with national objectives, international treaties and agreements? No, there is no advantage. One of the core aims of this scheme is to promote fundamental research.

g) Is the establishment of new collaborations more important than strengthening old ones? No, they are also of equal value. This is not a priority for this call.

h) How important is it to be interdisciplinary? This is encouraged but not necessary.

i) Is it important to include pilot data? This call is aiming to fund more risky, ground breaking research where there may not be pilot data, so pilot data is not necessary.

j) How important is it to include details on non-academic impact? This should be limited in your applications. We trust the funded PIs to do non-academic impact and dissemination as part of the project so the focus of the 5 pages should be on the transformational research only.

Q5: Regarding the high-level cost summary and eligible funding
a) What is the required level of detail? This needs to be only be indicative and not detailed. An outline of the information you should include can be found in the Announcement of Opportunity, Annex A (‘Project Finances’ section). This will not be considered as part of the assessment process. The NERC office will work with successful applicants to award the grants to give you as much flexibility as possible (but within the funding rules).

b) Where should the high-level cost summary be included in my application? Within the Resource sections of the JeS proforma.

c) Can Co-Investigator equivalents be funded on a Directly Allocated (DA) basis? No, on the basis that to add as DA, you need to name individuals, which we don’t want on these proposals. Estimates of Co-Investigator equivalents should come under Directly Incurred (DI) costs and we will work with
successful grant holders to ensure the funding can be used as required. For more information, please see the Announcement of Opportunity, Annex A (‘Project Finances’ section). All rules regarding eligible organisations are the same as for Standard Grants.

d) What are the cost limits for collaborators? NERC would expect the funding for any individual Co-I equivalent to be a maximum of 25% of the time commitment from the PI (which should be at least 40% FTE). Note, the 25% maximum is across the whole grant and not per year. The budget costs must reflect the requirements of the project.

e) Is there a maximum budget for equipment? There is no maximum equipment budget and multiple pieces of equipment could be requested but the funding limit of £2m at 100% FEC applies. Equipment (which is an asset over £10k) can be requested at 100% on this call – this is a change from previous policy and the Announcement of Opportunity will be updated to reflect this change. Anything under £10k counts as a consumable (DI-other) and will be funded at 80% FEC. Any ship and marine related costs will not be costed and included in the £2M limit and there is the option of requesting exceptional permission to exceed the £2m limit, but we are not expecting many cases, and any individual thinking of doing this should contact the NERC office. Equipment costs must reflect the requirements of the project.

f) Will the normal contribution expectations from organisations apply? Yes, grants will be funded at 80% Full Economic Cost (FEC), with the exception of equipment (100%), and organisations will cover the remaining contributions.

g) Can a PI commit 40% of their time for the project overall, but only cost it at 20%? Provided there is clear assurance that (i) the PI will commit 40% of their time, and that (ii) the RO will pay for half of their salary (and lose the associated indirect and estates costs), plus the 20% FEC of the overall cost of the grant, then this would be permitted as it shows a commitment by the RO. However, there is no expectation of this type of commitment from the RO.

Q6: Regarding PI time and track record

a) Does the minimum 40% PI time need to be over the duration of the entire grant, or does it need to be for each year of the award? It is over the full award, so the percentage of time could vary over different periods, because of intensive fieldwork or for managing caring responsibilities, for example. The PI effort may also ramp up as they take on research staff and/or reduce other workload (managing other projects or handover admin/teaching). There is an expectation that there will be research staff funded on the project so we would not expect a PI to spend no time on the project for significant periods (but for example, they could work at 20% then increase to 60% for periods).

b) How can I demonstrate that I have a track record of “ground-breaking” science and my “capability to advance the careers of others”? This will be based on examples of previous activity and will not be metric based (e.g. publications, income, etc).

c) Does an ECR need to discuss how they would support their more senior Co-I colleagues, or just focus on developing postdoc careers? All colleagues. This question is about showing leadership and team working.

Q7: Regarding collaborators

a) Are letters of support required for the involvement of (i) any Co-Investigators or (ii) any project partners? No. Further, we are not expecting to see the track records of collaborators within your application.

b) How should the investigator’s team be structured? There is no preferred structure, this is the PI’s decision.

c) To what extent does the wider project team need to be defined? It does not need to be defined at all, as this is not the priority of this call.

d) My application will include techniques/equipment that I’ve not used before. Can I have collaboration as part of the science and do I need to show evidence of agreement to use technologies/equipment? You can collaborate, but you do not need to outline who you will
collaborate with or provide evidence of agreements. Successful PIs will have the flexibility to collaborate with whoever they want to (with the normal funding rules applying).

**Q8: Regarding assessment and decision making**

a) Will the panel membership cover the whole of the NERC remit? Yes. For this call there will be no separate discipline specific panels.

b) Should the application be written for a panel with broad environmental expertise? It should be written for an audience of experts in your field to assess through full peer review, but the panel will not have expertise in every area so applicants should make the transformational aspects of the research clear to a broader audience.

c) Will my previous/current NERC funding be part of the assessment? Not specifically and not metric based, but you will want to highlight specific outputs in the case for support.

d) Will my previous experience outside of academia be part of the assessment? This information can be included in your case for support if it assists with justifying your capability to deliver and/or your track record in delivering innovative research.

e) Is the research project more important than my track record? No, they are of equal importance.

f) Will the panel provide a ranking as well as a mark out of 3? The panels will rank the top scoring applicants to determine which go to the interview panel and the interview panel will rank the top scoring applicants to advise the NERC Executive of their top candidates for funding. Lower scoring applications will not be further ranked.

g) Is there any advantage to putting in a “cheaper proposal”? No, the budget should reflect the research proposed.

h) As an ECR, will I be competitive for these awards given the potentially high award value? Yes you could be. The funding awards can be any value up to £2m, but funding requests can be much smaller than this. Also, an ECR may have a ground breaking idea and make a strong case for the full budget.

i) Would you consider funding > 5 grants if they were <£10M in total? No, we are expecting to fund 5 grants only, and extra costs may be required from the notional £10m budget for ship-time costs (or other costs).

j) Will there be a set split of the total £10m pot between ECR/established PIs? Or a minimum number of awards allocated to ECR researchers? No, the outcome will be based on the applications received, although we would certainly intend to fund a mix of both.

k) The JeS form has a number of the boxes typical from Standard Grants - specific objectives, non-technical summary, academic beneficiaries. Are these part of the assessment process, or will reviewers only be sent the 5+2 page proposal and track record? The reviewers will view the JeS form and the case for support, so those JeS boxes are also important.

l) Can you provide the timescale available to provide the additional documentation before the interview stage? Following the sift panels, the letters of support from the host organisation will be requested for shortlisted candidates with a 10-working day deadline for receipt.

m) In some NERC previous calls requiring organisational commitment, a senior representative has been present at the interview for the panel to ensure their commitment is real. Will that happen here? No.

n) Will there be an auditing process during / after the project given you are awarding £2m? It will be a similar process to other grants using Researchfish reporting and we will request 6 monthly reports for these grants. Financial audit will be through the UKRI Funding Assurance Team and Final Expenditure Statements.

o) If the project is not delivering as demonstrated by the audit process, will you remove the award? There will be some adjustment of the proposal during the award but there could be some cases where the work just isn’t working. We are looking to fund high risk proposals so some aspects of the research may not “work” but we would expect these exceptional PIs to be able to lead the research in new directions as required to generate important new understanding.
p) The Standard Grant Demand Management quota algorithm has been adjusted to exclude unfunded '9's. Will ALL unfunded Pushing the Frontiers proposals (even those rated 3) be included in demand management quota calculations? It’s not entirely clear how you can include two schemes with different ratings in a single quota algorithm. On a practical level, the Standard Grant proposals from the July 2019 round that scored 9 but were unfunded are being deferred to the next round (January 2020 – panels in June). As the Pushing the Frontiers call is a pilot there is no scope to do that and so any unfunded proposal will count as unfunded.