

EU Joint Programme - Neurodegenerative Disease Research (JPND)

Procedures for the call for proposals:

**" Linking pre-diagnosis disturbances of physiological systems
to Neurodegenerative Diseases "**

January 2021

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1. SCOPE

This document represents a statement of intent from the funding organisations conducting this joint transnational call for proposals. It is for use by the funding organisations and for information of the applicants that apply to this call. It complements the information provided by the call text. The funding organisations agree to make every reasonable effort to implement the call as described below and to fund as many high-ranked proposals as possible.

2. DEFINING ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Joint eligibility criteria have been specified in the call text. The decision on those criteria has been made by the Call Steering Committee, which will also decide on the compliance of proposals to these criteria. An assessment of applications with regard to joint eligibility criteria will be done by the Joint Call Secretariat during the formal check (see sections 5.1 and 6.1).

In addition, specific eligibility criteria might apply for each funding organisation. The decision on those specific criteria and compliance to them is the individual matter of the respective funding organisation. An assessment of applications with regard to specific criteria will be done by each funding organisation during the eligibility check (see sections 5.1 and 6.1). Each funding organisation will provide a specific information sheet to be published together with the call text. The specific information sheet shall inform on specific eligibility criteria that will be applied by the respective funding organisation. In addition, each funding organisation will provide contact details to be published as part of the call text in order to individually advise applicants on all specific questions and criteria.

3. ELECTRONIC PROPOSAL SUBMISSION AND EVALUATION

For proposal submission by the applicants and proposal distribution among the funding organisations, the JPND electronic submission and evaluation system (“PT Outline”, provided by the German JPND partner DLR Project Management Agency) will be used. Applicants will be able to register themselves to allow proposal submission. Call Steering Committee Members will be registered by the Joint Call Secretariat and the respective account will allow them to access all proposals.

The electronic submission and evaluation system will also be used to collect written statements from the Peer Review Panel members. Each reviewer will be registered and comprehensively informed by the Joint Call Secretariat. For each proposal, the reviewer will also have to declare on putative conflicts of interest (see section 4.2). The evaluation criteria and the scoring system will be further explained directly using the electronic submission and evaluation system, where reviewer statements and scores will be submitted. Each reviewer will be able to evaluate only those proposals assigned to them. The evaluations of the other involved reviewers will not be visible to them until the written evaluation stages (see sections 5.4 and 6.3) have been completed.

4. GENERAL EVALUATION PROCEDURES

4.1 Peer Review

The selection of reviewers is not restricted to countries participating in JPND, on the contrary international membership will be actively sought. Reviewers are not allowed to apply for this call and do not represent the funding organisations. They are appointed for their own scientific expertise and their evaluations must be based on the evaluation criteria for this call. A balance of gender and national representation will be sought.

From among the reviewers, a Chair will be appointed by the Call Steering Committee. The Chair will ideally be selected from a country not participating in this call or from a different neuroscientific discipline. The Joint Call Secretariat will brief the Chair on the call procedures.

The reviewers and the Chair will not be remunerated for their efforts at any time of the evaluation procedure. However, they will be reimbursed at standard rates for travel and accommodation expenses incurred for their attendance to the Peer Review Panel meetings.

4.2 Confidentiality and declarations of interest

Any written or oral information from the evaluation process (except what has been specified in sections 5.7 and 6.6) as well as the identity of the reviewers will remain confidential. The reviewers must sign an agreement regarding confidentiality and declaration of any conflicts of interest before undertaking the evaluation process. A disqualifying conflict of interest exists if a reviewer:

- was involved in the preparation of the proposal,
- benefits professionally, financially or personally from approval or rejection of the proposal,
- has a close family or other personal or professional relationship with an applicant,
- is currently working in an applicant’s department or laboratory unit.

In addition, a potential conflict of interest may exist if a reviewer:

- is a director, employee or trustee of an applicant’s institution,
- is or was employed by an applicant’s institution within the past three years,
- published together with an applicant in the past three years,
- joined a research collaboration together with an applicant in the past three years,
- is in any other situation influencing his or her ability to evaluate the proposal impartially.

Should a conflict of interest be identified, a reviewer will not review the proposal. During the Peer Review Panel meeting, the identified reviewer must leave the meeting room for the time of the discussion of the proposal. In case of any doubts, reviewers should discuss the matter with the Joint Call Secretariat or declare these doubts at the Peer Review Panel meeting.

4.3 Evaluation criteria and scoring

Evaluation of the proposals will be conducted according to the following criteria, which are equally weighted:

- **Relevance** to the aim of the call.
- **Scientific quality** including level of innovation, originality and feasibility.
- **Transnational added value** from working together as a research consortium, including planned scientific interaction, knowledge exchange and training.
- **International competitiveness** of participating research groups, including the demonstrated scientific expertise, and their appropriate mix.
- **Deliverable outcomes** in the short, medium and long term, including risk assessment and management.

For both written evaluations as well as at the Peer Review Panel meeting, the following scoring system will be used:

| Value | Score | Description and recommendation |
|-------|-----------|---|
| 5 | Excellent | Fully recommended as it stands |
| 4 | Good | Recommended with minor improvements |
| 3 | Fair | May only be supported on the basis of major revisions |
| 2 | Weak | Not recommended, weaknesses predominate |
| 1 | Poor | Clear rejection, underdeveloped |

Half-numbers may be used in order to indicate that a proposal is in between two scores. For final scores derived from the remote evaluation of pre-proposals (see section 5.6) or the Peer Review Panel meeting on full proposals (see section 6.4), decimal places may be utilised to fine-tune scoring for final ranking purposes.

In addition to the above described evaluation criteria and scores, which will apply during both pre-proposal and full proposal stages, there will be an additional evaluation of the provided work plan on how Patients and the Public (Patient and Public Involvement, PPI) will be involved at the full proposal stage only. PPI implementation will be assessed according to the following categories:

| Category | Description and recommendation |
|----------|--|
| A | The PPI approach is satisfactory |
| B | There is room for improvement in the PPI approach |
| C | PPI aspects are not satisfactory or not considered |

Indicators like “+” and “-” may be added to the categorisation in order to fine-tune the assessment. The results from the PPI evaluation will not be considered when making funding decisions, i.e. PPI is not an evaluation criterion as specified above. However, the results from the PPI evaluation may influence the final ranking of the full proposals (see section 6.4).

5. PRE-PROPOSAL EVALUATION AND DECISION

5.1 Formal and eligibility check

After the expiry of the submission deadline, the Joint Call Secretariat will check all proposals regarding their adherence to the joint criteria (e. g. date of submission; number of participating countries and groups; adherence to the proposal template). For proposals not meeting the joint criteria, the applicants may be allowed to revise the proposal within a time frame of 24 hours, following instructions from the Joint Call Secretariat. However, a revision will only be permitted in the case of slight shortcomings that will not impair the content of the proposal. After re-submission, the Joint Call Secretariat will provide the Call Steering Committee with all information on the revisions, including a suggestion on which of the revised proposals may be accepted and which should be rejected. The Call Steering Committee will take the final decision by email and on an individual basis on each proposal. If no consensus decision can be made, a majority decision will be taken.

The funding organisations will check the proposals for compliance with their individual regulations. Each funding organisation will confirm the eligibility of the respective applicants to the Joint Call Secretariat. Proposals including non-eligible partners may nevertheless be accepted at this stage and sent for review as long as they fulfil the requirements of the call without the non-eligible partner. Where possible, information on non-eligible partners will be communicated to the respective reviewers by the Joint Call Secretariat, stating that a later revision of the proposal is likely.

5.2 Establishing the Peer Review Panel

The Joint Call Secretariat will collect suggestions regarding reviewers (e.g. from the Call Steering Committee) and contact potential reviewers to request and coordinate their participation. The list of participating reviewers, including possible substitutes, and their assignment to individual proposals will be circulated to the Call Steering Committee for modification and final approval. No PPI experts will be involved during the pre-proposal evaluation.

5.3 Reviewer assignment

The Joint Call Secretariat will prepare a list of all submitted proposals that may typically include the title of the project, the list of diseases on which the project is focused, relevant keywords, a list of the project partners and the scientific abstract. This list will be circulated among the Peer Review Panel and reviewers will be asked to check the list of project partners to identify possible conflicts of interest (see section 4.2). In parallel, the Joint Call Secretariat will carry out an accompanying check for conflicts of interests. In addition, each reviewer will be asked for a self-assignment of the proposals according to his or her specific expertise.

Based on the reviewers' feedback and the results from the conflicts of interest check, the Joint Call Secretariat will prepare a draft assignment of reviewers to all proposals, thereby considering the following principles:

- Each proposal will be assigned to at least three reviewers. Additional reviewers may be included during the evaluation process, e.g. as a substitute reviewer (see section 5.4)
- Each reviewer should at least be assigned to three proposals. If possible, the number of evaluations per reviewer should not exceed ten proposals.
- Where there is no information on self-assignment available, the Joint Call Secretariat will make the assignment, thereby matching information from the scientific abstract of the proposal to the reviewers' expertise keywords.
- Reviewers will not be assigned to a proposal if:
 - they are from the same country as the coordinator of the proposal
 - they are from the same country as two project partners
 - they have a conflict of interest (see section 4.2)

5.4 Remote evaluation

For each proposal, all three reviewers will be asked to provide written statements and scoring (see section 4.3). The reviewers will be informed that their written statements will be anonymized and forwarded to the applicants.

A deadline for providing the remote evaluations will be given to the reviewers. It is envisaged that all proposals will receive three independent remote evaluations. One week ahead of the deadline, the Joint Call Secretariat will remind those reviewers that have not yet delivered their evaluations. A notification will be included to communicate within 24 hours if they are not able to submit the evaluations on time.

Directly after the deadline, non-responsive reviewers will again be contacted and requested to provide missing evaluations within one week. In parallel, the respective proposals will be sent to a substitute reviewer, asking for an evaluation also within one week. Should the involvement of a substitute reviewer result in a situation where there are more than three evaluations available for specific proposals, all available evaluations will be considered for the final decision (see section 5.6).

In the case of still missing evaluations at the end of the remote evaluation stage, the Joint Call Secretariat will keep on collecting these evaluations until the day of the decision (see section 5.6). However, these late evaluations may not be included in the consolidation phase (see section 5.5).

5.5 Consolidation

As soon as the remote evaluation phase is finished and the electronic submission and evaluation system is closed, it will be followed by a consolidation phase: all reviewers involved in the evaluation of a proposal will gain access to all available remote evaluations (written statements and scores) of the respective proposal. Reviewers will be allowed to revise their own evaluation in the light of the other evaluations within a pre-defined time slot. Any revision of their own evaluation must be justified and will be tracked by the Joint Call Secretariat and communication to the Call Steering Committee.

It is the aim of the consolidation phase to highlight proposals with disparate evaluations and allow the reviewers to consider their peers point of view and harmonise the outcome of the remote evaluation when appropriate. However, if no revisions will be requested by the reviewers, strongly divergent evaluations will be accepted and no further attempts of harmonisation will be done.

5.6 Decision on pre-proposals

After finishing the consolidation phase, the Joint Call Secretariat will provide the individual written statements and scores, the mean score (arithmetic mean) and the standard deviation for each proposal to the Call Steering Committee. Changes to the scores applied during the consolidation phase and their justifications by the respective reviewers will be communicated to the Call Steering Committee.

Afterwards, the members of the Call Steering Committee will meet either in person or by telephone conference to decide on the number of proposals to be invited for the full proposal stage. Call Steering Committee members not attending the meeting will be allowed to provide written comments and votes before the meeting. The Call Steering Committee might apply a weighting procedure to assure that no high-quality pre-proposal will be missed because of just one diverging evaluation. Double

weighting of the two highest scores may be applied if the standard deviation of a proposal is above a value of 1.0 and at least two of the individual reviewers scores are 4.0 or above.

On the basis of the agreed final ratings, the final score of each proposal will be calculated and rounded to the first decimal position. A ranking list of all proposals will be established. Finally, the Call Steering Committee will decide on the number of full proposals to be invited, ideally by consensus decision or by majority decision otherwise. The decision will take into account the budget available for the call, seeking for a number of full proposals approximately matching a minimum 2-fold oversubscription, but not exceeding a 3-fold oversubscription of the totally available budget of the call. All other proposals will be rejected and the consortia will not be permitted to submit a full proposal. The Joint Call Secretariat will provide final tables including the ranking of all proposals, the final scores as well as information on financial oversubscription of the funding organisations participating in the call. In addition, funding organisations being highly oversubscribed (more than 3-fold) after the pre-proposal stage should make individual arrangements to reduce their oversubscription, including:

- an increase of the earmarked budget to reduce the oversubscription below a factor of 3;
- the application of budget caps to research teams, where possible. If such caps are already in place, the maximum amount requested per research team could be lowered in order to match the available budget to the increased demand. Caution should be paid not to hamper the quality of the project and the proposed workplan.
- To make best possible use of the available call budget, redistribution of budgets within consortia including oversubscribed and undersubscribed countries should be encouraged. In this context, countries being underrepresented in the upcoming full proposal stage (i.e. oversubscription factor lower than 1.5) could envisage lowering or withdrawing existing caps in order to allow a budget re-distribution within the consortia (see section 5.7 and 9.1).

5.7 Communication of the results

After the decisions have been validated by all funding organisations, the Joint Call Secretariat will inform all coordinators about the outcome of the pre-proposal evaluation and the decision. The coordinators will be provided with the statements from the remote evaluation and the decision made by the Call Steering Committee. For proposals selected for the full proposal stage, coordinators will receive all relevant information from the Joint Call Secretariat. This will include a full proposal template as well as information on the proposal revision, on widening activities and on underrepresented countries (see section 9.1). Coordinators will be asked for their permission to share the proposal abstract with researchers from underrepresented countries in order to facilitate the inclusion of such teams. Nevertheless, it will be made clear that adding such groups is not mandatory and will have no influence on the outcome of the scientific evaluation. Also, the addition of partners must always be in compliance with the respective national funding rules of the involved funding organisations.

Where relevant, coordinators will also be informed that their consortium includes one or several team members from highly oversubscribed countries (see section 5.6). After approval by the Call Steering Committee, coordinators will be informed that reducing the budget requested by those teams will likely increase the number of fundable projects after the full proposal evaluation. Therefore, consortia should be asked to voluntarily elaborate on the possibility of an internal budget re-distribution from

oversubscribed towards undersubscribed partners. Also the inclusion of an additional regular partner from an EU-13 or from an underrepresented country (see section 9.1) may be envisaged where it helps to better distribute tasks and budgets within the consortium. Coordinators will be informed that any revision of the consortium or the budget must be agreed by the respective funding organisations. The Joint Call Secretariat will circulate to the Call Steering Committee a draft letter for decision communication to be sent to the coordinators in due time.

6. FULL PROPOSAL EVALUATION AND DECISION

6.1 Formal and eligibility check

The Joint Call Secretariat and the Call Steering Committee will conduct a formal and eligibility check of the proposals as described in section 5.1. In the case of deficits concerning the joint criteria, a revision of the proposal within a time frame of 24 hours may be allowed. However, the inclusion of a non-eligible regular partner at the full proposal stage will lead to the rejection of the full proposal without further evaluation.

6.2 Establishing the Peer Review Panel

Reviewers will, as a priority, be selected among those who already attended the pre-proposal evaluation. Additional reviewers will be recruited if there is a specific need (e.g. a specific expertise is missing) or in case that the number of available reviewers is not sufficient. For the reviewers' assignment, priority will be given to reviewers who already evaluated the respective pre-proposal. Additional reviewers will be assigned according to the principles described in sections 4.2 and 5.3 by matching the scientific expertise of a reviewer (keywords provided by the reviewer or taken from publication lists) to the research area of a proposal (based on provided keywords and abstract); this assignments will be approved by the reviewers themselves. The Call Steering Committee will approve the final reviewer assignment.

During the full proposal stage a PPI evaluation will also be conducted, which will be organised autonomously by JPND's PPI Stakeholder Advisory Board. External PPI experts (e.g. patients, relatives or carers) should be involved. Nominations of potential PPI experts can be made by Call Steering Committee members and by JPND's PPI Stakeholder Advisory Board. However, each nominated PPI expert must fulfil the requirements regarding confidentiality and conflicts of interest (see section 4.2). The assignment of PPI experts to the proposals will be done by the chairperson of the PPI Stakeholder Advisory Board. The Joint Call Secretariat will support the PPI evaluation process by providing access to the proposals and further information upon request. The Call Steering Committee will approve the final PPI expert assignments.

6.3 Written evaluation

At least three reviewers will be asked for written statements and scoring (see sections 4.3 and 5.4) for each full proposal. The reviewers will be informed that their written statements will be forwarded to the applicants in an anonymised form. A deadline for providing the remote evaluations will be given to the reviewers. One week ahead of the deadline, the Joint Call Secretariat will remind those reviewers that have not yet delivered their evaluations. After the expiry of the deadline, non-responsive reviewers will again be requested to provide missing evaluations within one week. Where needed, the respective proposals will also be sent to a substitute reviewer to maximise the chance

of three independent evaluations being available at the Peer Review Panel meeting (remotely or by personal attendance of the respective reviewers at the meeting).

The reviewers will actively be asked to provide their written assessments on time. As for the pre-proposals, a consolidation phase (see section 5.5) will be implemented as soon as the written assessments will be finished. Reviewers not attending the subsequent meeting will be asked to provide additional comments, where possible. In addition, the PPI experts will provide written feedback on the outcome of the PPI evaluation. A consolidated written statement will be provided for each proposal.

6.4 Peer Review Panel meeting

In advance of the Peer Review Panel meeting, the Joint Call Secretariat will circulate the scientific remote evaluations to all participants of the meeting, after confidentiality agreement signature. The Joint Call Secretariat will also circulate a coordinators and partners list with reduced information (without budgets and funding organisations) to the reviewers and ask them to declare any conflicts of interest before the meeting. A short statement from each reviewer for each proposal is needed.

In preparation for the Peer Review Panel meeting, a conference call will be scheduled between the Joint Call Secretariat and the chair. The Joint Call Secretariat will brief the chair regarding the general evaluation conditions, the outcome of the written evaluation and the preliminary ranking. The chair and the Joint Call Secretariat will also discuss the best way of conducting the meeting. CSC members will be invited to join this conference call; however, their participation is not mandatory.

A subset of the reviewers and PPI experts will then meet in person or by using a online meeting tool for joint evaluation of the proposals. The Call Steering Committee members will join the Peer Review Panel meeting as observers. At the meeting, the reviewers and PPI experts will discuss each proposal in detail. A rapporteur selected from among the scientific reviewers will give a brief overview of the proposal and summarize his or her own assessment. The other reviewers assigned to the proposal and present at the meeting will then summarize their opinions. These presentations will be followed by a summary on the PPI evaluation by one of the PPI experts. Finally, the chair will open the discussion to include the entire panel. As a result of the plenary discussion, the panel will agree on a funding recommendation for each proposal and on a ranking list of all proposals recommended for funding. The panel may also cluster proposals with similar overall quality and assign a final score to each category.

Ideally, all decisions of the panel will be unanimous decisions. Nevertheless, in case of divergent opinions, a simple majority decision will be sought by the chair. Where applicable, the panel may also comment on the appropriateness of the budget requested by the applicants. After the meeting, the Joint Call Secretariat will draft the minutes of the meeting, which will be approved by the Peer Review Panel and the Call Steering Committee.

6.5 Decision on full proposals

According to the final ranking list from the Peer Review Panel meeting, the Call Steering Committee will identify a subset of proposals to be funded (see section 7 for a description of the funding mechanism). The chair of the Peer Review Panel might be asked to join the Call Steering Committee meeting to confirm the panel's views and provide scientific advice, where needed. If the number of

proposals recommended for funding is smaller than the call’s budget can support, only part of the funds will be used. However, if the number of fundable proposals exceeds the available budget, the Call Steering Committee will discuss arrangements in order to maximise the number of supported proposals (see section 7 for further details). There may be a need for iteration following the meeting before a final decision on each proposal can be made.

6.6 Communication of the results

The Joint Call Secretariat will inform all coordinators about the outcome of the proposal evaluation and the funding decision. They will be provided with the statements from the written evaluation and the PPI assessment as well as a summary from the Peer Review Panel meeting. Where proposals are to be funded, the project partners will be contacted by the respective funding organisations (for a timeline see section 10).

The Joint Call Secretariat will formally notify the chair of JPND as well as relevant JPND Steering Committees of the final funding decisions. The final list of awarded projects will be published on the JPND website in alphabetical order of the project titles (for a timeline see section 10).

7. FUNDING PROCEDURE

7.1 Allocation and use of budgets

Individual budgets were dedicated (earmarked) to this call by the respective funding organisations, as published in the related specific information sheets. These budgets will be used to support research carried out by scientists and institutions according to the rules and legal framework of the respective funding organisations. The “virtual common pot” model will be used: Each funding organisation will only fund its own approved applicants with the allocated amount of money. No “cross-border” funding will apply. Due to the described funding model, two scenarios might apply for each funding organisation:

- If less money is needed as compared to the available budget (e.g. because a low number of respective applicants will be recommended for funding), the remaining budget will not be spent and remain in the portfolio of the funding organisation. Therefore, it might be possible that the total budget earmarked for this call will not be spent completely.
- If the required budget exceeds the available budget (e.g. because a very high number of respective applicants will be recommended for funding), the funding organisation might not be able to support all successful applicants (funding gap). In this case, funding will be administered according to the ranking order of proposals, making best use of the respective national budgets.

In order to ensure a best-possible use of the earmarked budget and to avoid funding gaps, each funding organisation is asked to fund as fully and realistically as possible, the requested budgets of the proposals with the budget earmarked for the call.

7.2 Funding decisions

Proposals will be funded in accordance to the ranking order, starting with the highest ranked. While going down the list, it will be verified for each proposal whether sufficient budget is available from the funding organisations involved in this proposal to support all partners of the consortium. As long as this is ensured, the proposal will be funded and the requested budget will be dedicated to the

individual applicants. As a result, the remaining budget of the related funding organisations will decrease. The more proposals are selected for funding, the less budget will be available among the different funding organisations to support further proposals.

In the case that a funding gap occurs (i.e. the remaining budget of a funding organisation will not be sufficient to fund the respective partner of the consortium), the Call Steering Committee will discuss possible options to overcome the funding gap. Priority should be given to overcoming the funding gap by national arrangements, e.g. by increasing the available budget for the call. When a solution can be found, the proposal can be funded. However, if no solution can be found, the respective proposal will not be funded at all, even if there is budget available to support the remaining partners of the consortium.

In case of ties between two or more proposals at the same ranking position (see section 6.4), the Call Steering Committee may decide on the proposals to be funded according to the available budgets and with the aim to maximise the number of high quality projects to be funded. In this regard, the Call Steering Committee may give priority to fund proposals that involve partners from EU-13 and underrepresented countries. However, it is envisaged to follow the suggested order within each category as far as possible.

7.3 Administration of funding

Proposals selected for funding will receive support for up to three years. Eventual no-cost extensions of individual contracts will be decided by each funding organisation and the information will be centralised by the Joint Call Secretariat and forwarded to the Call Steering Committee. Each partner of the consortium will be funded directly from the corresponding funding organisation. Funding will be administered according to the terms and conditions of the responsible funding organisations, which might be different for each partner of the consortium. There will not be any centralized funding or budget administration by the JPND.

8. REPORTING

Each consortium will be required to submit to the Joint Call Secretariat a brief annual scientific progress report in January of each year and a final scientific report within three months of the end of the project. A template will be provided by the Joint Call Secretariat to the coordinator, who is in charge of submitting such reports on behalf of the consortium. The Joint Call Secretariat will circulate such reports to all funding organisations involved in the respective proposals.

The individual funding organisations will assess the reports with regard to scientific progress, adherence to the work plan and compliance to the respective organisation’s regulations. In the case of any queries, they might either directly contact the respective consortium partners or request the Joint Call Secretariat to obtain a statement from the coordinator.

In addition to the central reporting as described above, funding organisations may request additional reports from the related consortium partners with regard to the organisation’s individual requirements.