



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council

## International Public Policy Observatory Call specification

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## Summary

The International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) will provide research and evidence to inform public policy decision-makers in developing effective strategies for responding to and recovering from the social, economic and public health impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. It will work through collaboration and co-production with policy actors, researchers and centres of excellence in the UK and internationally, the ESRC and other funders to increase understanding of interventions and public policy responses to address the pandemic that may be effective.

To do this, the Observatory will:

- collate, analyse and synthesise evidence on the range and potential effectiveness of policies being implemented, including and especially beyond the UK, providing access to and insights into this evidence in ways which respond directly to the needs of policy actors; this will require providing insights into the potential transferability to the UK context of other countries' interventions
- facilitate new connections and enable rapid direct access to national and international expertise for policy actors
- over time support commissioning of new research to feed into policy decisions and future funding strategy where key gaps in evidence or quality are identified

The Observatory will start activity no later than 23 October 2020 and the award will end on 30 September 2022. The IPPO will necessarily take time to develop and deploy a full programme of activity and is expected to take a phased approach. This will see critical basic infrastructure put in place at pace to optimise value from the earliest possible stage, with a phased approach to wider activity and resource to support it developed over time as evidence-led insights into priority areas and activities emerge.

ESRC will invest up to £2m at 100% full economic cost (fEC) through this competition. One award will be made. ESRC will meet 80% of the full economic costs on proposals submitted. These will not include the costs for any research commissioned in association with the Observatory, which will be supported through a separate fund.

All proposals to this call must be led by a researcher at an eligible UK Research Organisation (RO) and will need to be submitted through the Research Councils' Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) system. For details of eligible organisations please visit the following website: <https://www.ukri.org/funding/how-to-apply/eligibility/>

Proposals to this call have two elements: an online form requesting key basic information; and one mandatory attachment, the Business Plan, which is to be completed offline and uploaded as a (recommended PDF) attachment in Je-S. The focus of the Business Plan is on setting out high level thinking on the vision for the IPPO and the overarching approach to delivering this; detailed plans are not expected at this stage and will be developed in partnership with ESRC and others during an initial 6 month inception phase.

The deadline for submissions is no later than **16.00 on 15 September 2020**.

Proposals will be assessed by a panel of academic and policy experts and shortlisted applicants will be interviewed in w/c 5 October 2020. The interview date will be confirmed to all applicants when the call closes. The successful applicant will be required to submit a

full proposal formally through the Research Councils' Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) system in October 2020.

## **Background**

COVID-19 has rapidly become a global pandemic. National governments around the world have adopted different approaches to mitigating the health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic, and an increasing body of research evidence is being generated to support the response to, and economic and social recovery from, the pandemic. Demand for evidence on the full impacts of the pandemic, which policies may be effective in addressing these, and which of these may translate effectively into other contexts and countries, is already high and likely to increase. This demand is driven by the fact that decisions being taken at pace about economic and social measures affecting jobs, education and other public services have implications for the short, medium and long term outcomes and well-being of millions of people and the UK as a whole. But with relevant research rapidly increasing in volume and growing in diversity there is urgent demand for more systematic evidence collation, quality assessment, synthesis and delivery to policymakers in ways that promote insight and clarity and avoid information overload and confusion.

Efforts are underway globally to try to join evidence together and provide access to it. Some track and record international public policy responses to Covid-19, including publicly accessible online resources like those from [WHO](#), [OECD](#) and [IMF](#). Within the UK, projects that track policy responses internationally include the University of Oxford's [Covid-19 Government response tracker](#). Others are working to collate or provide direct access to data on or of use to policy responses, for example CLOSER's [Covid-19 Longitudinal Research Hub](#) and the Royal Society's [DELVE Initiative](#). Some provide access to research publications from particular research disciplines, like CEPR's [Covid Economics](#), or across institutions, like [LSE's Covid-19 resource centre](#). Others are producing syntheses targeted at specific policy audiences, such as the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology's [Covid-19 analyses](#), or for responses in specific areas of the UK, like the West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute's [Covid-19 analysis](#). And information on research funding opportunities and funded projects relevant to Covid-19 is also being collated, across borders such as the [European Commission's Coronavirus Research and Innovation](#) as well as by funding agencies such as [UKRI's Coronavirus Hub](#).

However, across this growing array of online resources, a key challenge policy makers have articulated is how to quickly and clearly identify the resources that are most relevant to their immediate requirements. They also want to understand the robustness of the evidence underpinning the development and impact of policy responses internationally. Clear analysis of which policy responses are not only promising in effect but might most effectively translate into other national contexts, and under what circumstances, is limited. Many resources are aimed at more mixed audiences including public and media, as well as researchers and policy officials, which affects how the information is provided. Initiatives can also be limited in scale or focus, or work in silos of policy topic, research discipline or context, which impacts their usefulness for policy audiences.

Tackling this challenge requires a different approach, one that creates a truly collaborative space to bring together the diverse needs and insights of policymakers and researchers in innovative and flexible ways, and through this respond in proactive and reactive ways to the evolving evidence demands generated by the pandemic response and recovery. The

International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) will provide this space, engaging directly and in partnership with national and international policy-makers and experts to collate and co-ordinate research and funding, share findings and package research outputs in ways that ensure they are delivered to the relevant policy-makers at the right time and in the most suitable format to support effective decision-making.

### **Mission and focus**

The mission of the IPPO is to provide research and evidence to inform public policy decision-makers in developing effective strategies for responding to and recovering from the social, economic and public health impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. It will work through collaboration and co-production with policy actors, researchers and centres of excellence in the UK and internationally, and ESRC and other funders, to increase understanding of interventions and public policy responses to address the pandemic that may be effective.

To do this, the IPPO will:

- collate, analyse and synthesise evidence on the range and potential effectiveness of policies being implemented, including and especially beyond the UK, providing access to and insights into this evidence in ways which respond directly to the needs of policy actors; this will require providing insights into the potential transferability to the UK context of other countries' interventions
- facilitate new connections and enable rapid direct access to national and international expertise for policy actors
- over time support commissioning of new research to feed into policy decisions and future funding strategy where key gaps in evidence or quality are identified

To progress its long term mission, the initial phase of the Observatory will focus on developing, testing and iterating effective approaches in relation to the following set of public policy areas:

- education
- mental health and well-being
- care homes and adult social care
- housing, communities and cohesion
- addressing disproportionate impacts on BAME groups
- vulnerable individuals and communities
- living online

Given the dynamic and wide-ranging nature of the policy need, the IPPO will need to deploy a phased and demand-led approach to prioritising within and across these public policy areas through close collaboration with key policy stakeholders and ESRC. For all policy areas, the Observatory will need to address tackling inequalities and harnessing behavioural change, where there is evidence that can be exploited on these themes. The prioritisation is not expected to be fully developed in initial proposals, and will emerge and develop over time, but applicants must explain how they will develop and deliver an appropriate, phased approach to this that will enable early substantive progress in policy areas where immediate gains are achievable. Applicants must identify in their proposal which policy area(s) they will prioritise in the initial inception phase and provide a clear rationale for this decision.

ESRC will fund the Observatory for an initial period of two years (until end Sept 2022) to enable a rapid response to current urgent evidence need and to generate evidence about the effectiveness of this new model to inform further investment decisions. At the end of the two year period ESRC will assess and review progress prior to any decision about forward development of the Observatory.

## **Audience and partners**

The IPPO's initial primary audience will be senior UK national and devolved policy decision-makers, though ESRC expects that over time the range and location of policy actors the Observatory directly engages with will increase, both within the UK and internationally. To be effective, the IPPO will need to be clear and targeted in its approach to its audiences, and its work will need to be grounded in a broad and deep understanding of their needs. This understanding will be gained through engaged partnerships and deep collaboration with these stakeholders. Co-production with policy audiences will therefore be a central guiding principle in the IPPO's objectives and will be embedded throughout its approach and activities.

Initially key evidence sources to enable IPPO to make rapid progress in understanding evidence need will include existing work such as the Covid-updated and other relevant departmental Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) and ongoing work in the UK Parliament to collate evidence needs across the legislature. However, the IPPO will need to rapidly broaden and deepen its own insights in order to effectively develop a flexible, responsive programme of activity that balances proactive and reactive responses in a context of rapidly evolving evidence need. Policy partnerships are not expected to be fully developed in initial proposals, and will emerge and develop over time, but applicants must explain how they will develop these, as well as how they will embed an effective combination of national, regional and local government and legislative input in their core team and/or advisory mechanisms to enable flexible, responsive and informed activity.

In responding to and anticipating the likely evidence needs of its audiences, from the outset the IPPO will draw on a wide range of evidence sources from researchers around the world and from across and beyond the social sciences. This will include research involving diverse methodologies and methods, including analyses of primary and secondary data, and outputs ranging from formal research publications to grey literature and reviews. To deliver this the Observatory will establish partnerships with national and international centres of research excellence working on related topics, including drawing upon existing funded research investments.

Significant immediate value will arise from engagement by the IPPO with pre-existing research insights relevant to the Covid-19 response and recovery policy challenges. But UKRI and other funding agencies internationally are investing significantly in new Covid-focused research and the IPPO is expected to track, engage with and harness the value of insights emerging from this as a central component of its work. This will include developing a close and productive relationship with the ESRC-funded Covid [Economics Observatory](#), given the related but distinct roles of each, as well as research being funded through current UKRI Covid-19 calls and the work of initiatives like the [Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform](#). Partnerships with research centres of excellence are not expected to be fully developed in initial proposals, and will emerge and develop over time, but applicants must explain their knowledge of the evidence landscape and how they will draw on and

build effective collaborations with national and international centres of excellence relevant to the IPPO's scope and mission.

### **Programme of activity**

The IPPO's programme of activity will be grounded in the broad and deep understanding of need, demand and evidence described above, supported through partnerships and deep collaboration. It will also be informed by and expected to contribute to knowledge on effective approaches to supporting research-informed policy-making. The IPPO will adopt an iterative approach to designing, delivering and developing its programme of activity, based on both wider insights and its own learning, but key strands are expected to include:

- Monitoring, collating and analysing existing national and international studies on and relevant to Covid-19 response and recovery policy interventions, to identify, filter and make available high quality policy-relevant research outputs
- Synthesis and briefings to support public policy responses to the pandemic, with a strong emphasis on comparative international approaches, that complement other existing synthesis activity and address clear and pressing policy needs
- Facilitating rapid access to national and international expertise beyond the IPPO by establishing, maintaining and facilitating access to a database of international expertise that policy makers can draw upon directly to support their policy needs
- Enabling connections and dialogue between national and international policy makers and leading experts on key policy questions to stimulate evidence-based policy-making
- Through the above and over time, identify gaps in evidence or quality which require new research activity, and support the commissioning of small-scale scoping and pilot studies whose findings will be open, comparable and reproducible. This research will be facilitated through a separate fund to which the Observatory will be able to submit ideas. Scope for the Observatory's involvement in this will be developed and agreed in partnership with ESRC during the inception phase.

The IPPO will necessarily take time to develop and be able to deliver a full programme of activity across all the above, and is expected to take a phased approach in which critical basic infrastructure is put in place at pace to optimise its value from the earliest possible stage, with wider activity and resource to support it developed over time as evidence-led insights into priority areas and activities emerge. Both the approach taken to prioritisation of policy areas and to phasing of activity will necessarily take time and have implications for resources and staffing, and this will be a key focus for the initial 6 month inception phase.

Key early focus is expected to be on development of a web portal with immediate depth of content, initial construction of an expertise database, development of an effective approach to prioritisation of policy themes and evidence sources, and establishment of effective leadership and governance structures. The activity programme is not expected to be fully defined in initial proposals, but applicants must describe more fully initial activity for the 6 month inception phase and indicate their ambitions for key developments to be in delivery by months 12 and 18.

The IPPO is expected to embed inter/multidisciplinary working both within and beyond the social sciences, but at least 50% of the proposed programme of activity must be within ESRC remit. Please refer to the list of research areas that fall within ESRC remit

[www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/is-my-research-suitable-for-esrc-funding/discipline-classifications](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/is-my-research-suitable-for-esrc-funding/discipline-classifications)) for further information.

### **Structure and organisation**

The IPPO is an innovative effort to deepen approaches to systematically connecting high quality international research evidence and associated experts with the global policy community. As such, applicants are encouraged to think imaginatively about the appropriate structure to ensure the IPPO can maximise responsiveness and flexibility, foreground co-production and collaboration, and deliver robust and independent evidence on even the most politicised issues. ESRC expects this will involve a core team supported by a wider range of collaborators based throughout the UK and beyond.

The structure proposed will need to deliver:

- exceptional leadership from an individual or team with strong connections and deep understanding of relevant policy stakeholders in the UK and beyond
- wide-ranging research and synthesis capacity, both embedded in core roles and enabled through more flexible mechanisms such as placements and fellowships, including the language skills needed to access evidence globally
- excellent science communication for public policy
- effective networking and brokering capacity for policy and research, and within and beyond the UK
- the technical capability to rapidly produce a wide range of high quality outputs
- monitoring and evaluation capability that can support real-time internal learning and iteration of practice as well as generate wider insights of value to external audiences

Both the approach taken to prioritisation of policy areas and to phasing of activity will necessarily inform assembly of the wider team as well as partnerships moving forwards, and significant iteration and development of both is expected to take place during the initial 6 month inception phase.

We welcome inter-organisational proposals and also encourage partnerships with non-HEI organisations and with non-UK organisations. We expect non-academic stakeholders, including potential users, to be included and involved in both the early design and on-going conduct of the IPPO.

The Observatory will need to recruit an appropriate advisory board and carefully consider the engagement mechanisms that will support it to deliver a rapid and responsive approach to changing real time needs and priorities.

Plans for staffing and for membership of the advisory board are not expected to be fully developed in initial proposals but applicants must detail key members and roles, and describe how they will approach recruiting the expertise, skills and capacity required to deliver the IPPO's mission and activities.

### **ESRC's engagement with IPPO**

Given the phased, flexible and innovative nature of the investment, ESRC will have a high degree of ongoing interaction with the IPPO as key partners and enablers. This will include but extend well beyond active and engaged investment management. ESRC will play an active role in brokering connections for the IPPO with policy, research and funding

stakeholders in the UK and internationally through our strong and diverse networks and partnerships.

ESRC will establish a steering board of senior policy, research and funding experts as part of the governance structure for the IPPO and related investments. This will act as a ‘critical friend’, advising both ESRC and the IPPO on planned activity, as well as inputting to decisions about commissioning of additional studies and the review of future IPPO investment at the end of this two-year phase.

Successful applicants will be expected to follow branding guidelines of the ESRC (<https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/visual-identity-and-logos/>) and any other funders when developing digital or printed material as part of the grant activity, such as including appropriate logos on websites or publications.

### **Research ethics**

Applicants must ensure that the proposed activity will be carried out to a high ethical standard and the IPPO’s activity must comply with the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics: [www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/) . Successful applicants will be required to provide a statement on how any potential ethical and health and safety issues have been considered and will be addressed, and ensure that all necessary ethical approval is in place and all risks are minimised before the associated activity commences.

### **Funding**

The ESRC will be investing up to £2 million at 100% full economic cost (fEC) in one award through this call. The fEC value refers to the total cost of the project, and is not the actual contribution paid by the ESRC. The ESRC’s contribution for UK applicants for most cost headings is 80% of fEC.

As noted above, these costs are not expected to cover any research commissioned in association with the Observatory, which will be supported through a separate fund.

Costs will be supported in-line with standard ESRC funding rules. All applicants are strongly advised to consult their institutional finance/research offices regarding the financial aspects of their proposal. Indicative costings are requested at application stage and successful applicants will be expected to provide a full breakdown and justification of all costs at contracting. Costs at contracting must not vary by more than 10% from costs at application and cannot exceed the funding available for the call.

The IPPO award will have a start date no later than 23 October 2020 and will have a fixed end date of 30 September 2022.

### **Selection criteria**

Proposals to this call will be assessed against the criteria listed below:

- A clear and compelling vision for the IPPO based on a sound understanding of the need and opportunity to support public policy strategies for responding to and recovering from Covid-19



- An overarching approach to delivery which responds appropriately to existing relevant resources and initiatives, demonstrable demand from policy makers, and evidence on effective approaches to supporting evidence-based policy
- Clear and achievable plans for activity and outputs in the inception phase and an indication of those for later stages of the IPPO that is built on a robust and appropriate approach to phasing activity and prioritising policy areas
- A demonstrable commitment to coproduction and collaboration with relevant policy and research stakeholders in the UK and internationally that will enable flexible, responsive decision-making and support high quality, impactful activity
- A robust and appropriate approach to monitoring and evaluation, including a demonstrable commitment to reflective and iterative practice as well as to contributing to knowledge on effective approaches to science advisory mechanisms for public policy
- Exceptional leadership from an individual or team with strong connections to and deep understanding of relevant policy stakeholders in the UK and beyond, with clear plans for developing a structure and staffing that will effectively coordinate, manage and provide the range of skills, capabilities and resources needed for the IPPO's activity
- An appropriate and reasonable high level balance of funding across the different strands of activity and delivery support required, demonstrating value for money

### **Eligibility**

Standard ESRC eligibility rules apply. For further information please see ESRC's Research Funding Guide <http://www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide/>

However, if in doubt of eligibility, please refer to the FAQs which can be downloaded from the ESRC website: (<https://esrc.ukri.org/files/funding/funding-opportunities/ippo-faqs/>) or contact the office.

### **Principal investigators**

For this call, normal ESRC eligibility rules apply. This means principal investigators on proposals to this call must be based at a UK institution eligible for Research Council funding; see the UKRI website for a list of eligible organisations (<https://www.ukri.org/funding/how-to-apply/eligibility/>).

It is likely that successful applications will be led by experienced researchers who are internationally recognised and have a well-established track record relevant to the IPPO's mission, as well as proven ability to deliver a large-scale research project successfully. The amount of time committed to the grant by the PI and co-investigators must be costed into the proposal, but very small fractions of co-investigator time should be avoided. Standard ESRC research funding rules would apply for staff engaged in more than one ESRC grant (see ESRC Research Funding Guide, page 27: [www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide)).

### **Co-investigators and collaborators**

The inclusion of international co-investigators in proposals is encouraged, however please note that academic researchers (at PhD or equivalent status) must be from established

overseas research organisations of comparable standing to ESRC-eligible UK research organisations to be listed as international co-investigators under this call.

International collaboration is not limited to co-investigators but may also involve other partnerships integral to delivery of the IPPO's mission. Further information on eligibility is provided within the ESRC Research Funding Guide ([www.esrc.ukri.org/rfg](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/rfg)); guidance on the inclusion of international co-investigators is also available at [www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-international-co-investigators-on-proposals](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-international-co-investigators-on-proposals).

We welcome inter-institutional applications and strongly encourage partnerships with non-HEI organisations and particularly encourage the inclusion of public sector co-investigators (see [www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-uk-business-third-sector-or-government-body-co-investigators-on-esrc-proposals](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/inclusion-of-uk-business-third-sector-or-government-body-co-investigators-on-esrc-proposals)).

The ESRC will fund all justified costs associated with international co-investigators and UK business, civil society or government bodies at 100% fEC. However, these combined costs must not exceed 30% of the full 100% fEC cost of the grant. Applicants should note ESRC's policy on the inclusion of international co-investigators on proposals (please see Je-S guidance for the call).

### **Capacity-building**

We will be looking for evidence of a strong commitment from the IPPO to support the development of researchers at all stages of their career and that capacity-building for both researchers and policy makers is considered an integral part of the Observatory.

The focus should be on the quality and impact of the IPPO, and how increasing capacity contributes to this. Examples of building capacity include:

- Support and mentoring for all members of the team
- Building networks within and beyond academia

We encourage applicants to include the participation of Early Career Researchers in the application. Please refer to ESRC policy development around early career researchers in other ESRC funding schemes: [www.esrc.ukri.org/skills-and-careers/postgraduate-careers/early-career-researchers](http://www.esrc.ukri.org/skills-and-careers/postgraduate-careers/early-career-researchers)

### **How to apply**

Proposals must be submitted to Je-S by the call deadline 16.00 (UK time) on 15 September 2020. Electronic acknowledgements will be sent to the principal investigator and submitting organisation. All proposals must be submitted in English, costed in pounds sterling using the Research Councils Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) system. Proposals can only be accepted by electronic submission through the Je-S system:

<https://jes.rcuk.ac.uk/jeS2WebLoginSite/Login.aspx>

The initial proposal has two elements: an online form requesting key basic information; and one mandatory attachment, the Business Plan, which is to be completed offline and uploaded as (recommended PDF) attachments in Je-S. The template for the Business Plan is available on the call website at <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/announcement-international-public-policy-observatory/>. The focus of the Business Plan is on setting out high level indicative thinking on the vision for the IPPO and the overarching approach to

delivering this; detailed plans are not expected at this stage and will be developed in partnership with ESRC and others during the initial 6 month inception phase.

Generic guidance on the completion of the structured boxes and sections of the form is available from the Je-S Help screens, which can be found at the top right hand corner of each Je-S screen.

Applicants must ensure that they have read and complied with the call-specific guidance set out in the 'Je-S guidance for applicants' which is available at <https://esrc.ukri.org/files/funding/funding-opportunities/ippo-je-s-guidance/> as well as the assessment criteria set out in this call specification. Where call-specific guidance provided in these call documents differs from generic Je-S help, the call-specific guidance should always be followed. Care and attention must be given to completing the proposal correctly and complying with all technical requirements. Proposals that are not completed correctly may be rejected by the ESRC office.

The final submission process is the responsibility of the host institution, and the ESRC cannot accept responsibility for any delays which may occur. It is recommended that applicants submit in good time before the call deadline at this stage. We strongly advise applicants to confirm with their relevant administrator that the proposal has been submitted successfully to the ESRC.

### **Assessment of applications**

The assessment of applications will be a two stage process. Applications will be assessed and shortlisted by an assessment panel. A maximum of three shortlisted applications will be invited to attend an interview with panel members. This invitation will be issued by no later than 2 October 2020.

Interviews will take place via an online video communications platform in w/c 5 October 2020 and the final date will be confirmed to all applicants when the call closes. Interviews will include a short presentation by applicants followed by questions from the panel to explore their proposal in more detail, taking into account the call assessment criteria.

The funding decision will be communicated in w/c 12 October and the successful applicant will be invited to submit a full application via Je-S during October 2020. If necessary, a letter of intent will be issued by ESRC to ensure the Observatory can start by no later than 23 October 2020.

### **Commissioning timetable**

- Pre-call issued – 14 July 2020
- Call and guidance issued – 27 July 2020
- **Closing date for proposals – 15 September 2020**
- Shortlisting outcomes communicated – by 2 October 2020
- Interviews to take place – w/c 5 October 2020 (date TBC at call close)
- Decisions to applicants – w/c 12 October 2020
- Start date – no later than 23 October 2020

**Further enquiries**

Enquiries relating to ESRC research funding rules and proposal procedures should be addressed to:

- IPPO commissioning team  
Email: [ESRCPolicyImpact@esrc.ukri.org](mailto:ESRCPolicyImpact@esrc.ukri.org)

Enquiries relating to technical aspects of the Je-S form should be addressed to:

- Je-S helpdesk  
Email: [jeshelp@je-s.ukri.org](mailto:jeshelp@je-s.ukri.org)  
Telephone: 01793 444164 Monday to Thursday 08.30 to 17.00 Friday 08.30 to 16.30 (UK time, excluding public and other holidays)