Research Ireland - Gas Networks Ireland

Innovation Challenge 2025

The GNI Challenge 2025

Call Document

May 2025

KEY DATES	
• Call Launch	**29th May 2025**
• Application Deadline	**26th September 2025, 13:00 Dublin Local Time**
• Funding Decision	**November 2025**
• Award Start Date	**1st January 2026**
• Prize Award Start Date	**1st July 2027**

Terms of Reference

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[1] Taighde Éireann - Research Ireland ("Research Ireland") is the national research and innovation funding agency which was established on 1 August 2024. Research Ireland amalgamates the activities of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland.

[2] https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/280396/0298745e-3ddb-446b-9e6b-ed8c9f10fadc.pdf

The ***Taighde Éireann | Research Ireland - Gas Networks Ireland Innovation Challenge 2025 (GNI Challenge)*** aims to support research projects that have potential to generate STEM-based solutions for utilisation by the renewable gas industry, giving rise to national impact in the journey to achieve carbon neutrality. The solutions, and the underlying technologies proposed, should be innovative and advance the state of the art, and they should be informed by the current needs of the industry. Research Ireland and GNI have identified two overarching challenge themes to guide the collaborative engagement and research activity under this call:

- The **Energy System Integration Challenge** will seek to support the development of solutions to accelerate the optimisation and integration of the energy system in Ireland's transition to a low carbon economy. There are two broad themes under this Challenge: (1) the integration of renewable gases at a local and regional level and (2) the development of Artificial Intelligence-based solutions for intelligent gas network performance diagnostics.
- The **Biomethane and Biohydrogen Challenge** will seek to support the development of solutions which improve the efficiency, efficacy and commercial viability of (1) biomethane and (2) biohydrogen production, including extraction and utilisation of the byproducts.

The GNI Challenge will implement the challenge funding framework of the Research Ireland Future Innovator Prize programme model. This is a phased funding programme under which finalists compete for an overall Prize Award of €1M.

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1. Challenge Funding and the Research Ireland Future Innovator Prize

The Research Ireland Future Innovator Prize is a challenge funding programme that seeks to support Ireland's best and brightest unconventional thinkers and innovators to develop novel, potentially disruptive, technologies to address significant societal challenges.

Challenge funding is a solution-focused approach to research funding that uses a combination of grants, competition, incentive prizes, and strict timelines to direct research activities at specific, often complex, problems. It focuses on finding the most innovative and impactful solutions using competitive processes to incentivise innovators. Research Ireland's approach to challenge funding places strong emphasis on:

(i) **Inter and Transdisciplinary Teams**, reflecting the need to bring together experts and innovators from different disciplines to address complex challenges;

(ii) **Engagement and Validation** with stakeholders, beneficiaries and end-users of research in an area relevant to a challenge is critical to understanding the nature and boundaries of specific problems, in testing assumptions and co-creating solutions;

(iii) **Acceleration** through efficient adaptation of approaches based on iterative engagement with beneficiaries and stakeholders.

The *Research Ireland – Gas Networks Ireland Innovation Challenge* will implement the challenge funding structure of the Future Innovator Prize programme which comprises three phases: Concept, Seed and Prize Award. Following the application review, successful teams will initially be provided with access to funding of up to €50k over 6 months to undertake team building, challenge/solution validation activities during the Concept Phase. They then will undergo a rigorous review before receiving additional funding of up to €150k in the 12-month Seed Phase to further validate and prototype their proposed solutions. Upon completion of the Seed Phase, finalists will compete for follow-on funding from the challenge prize fund of €1M.

Interdisciplinary teams with expertise from across research disciplines, including both STEM and AHSS disciplines, are encouraged to apply, as appropriate for the solutions proposed. Further details on the structure of the programme and eligibility of teams are provided in Sections 4 and 5.

2. Objectives of the Research Ireland - Gas Networks Ireland Innovation Challenge

Gas Networks Ireland (GNI) is a commercial semi-state organisation that operates and maintains Ireland's €2.7bn and 14,664 km national gas network, which is considered one of the safest and most modern renewables-ready gas networks in the world. This gas network supplies more than 30% of Ireland's total energy, including 40% of all heating and almost 50% of the country's electricity generation, and provides energy to over 720,000 Irish homes and businesses. GNI is committed to growth, innovation, safety and sustainability, and by working to replace natural gas with renewable gases, such as biomethane and green hydrogen, and complementing intermittent renewable electricity, GNI is supporting Ireland's journey to a future with cleaner energy. With funding from the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU), GNI can provide funding to support academic research teams to develop disruptive technologies.

In support of the common objective to deliver positive impact for the Irish society from research and innovation, **Research Ireland and GNI have partnered to develop the Research Ireland - Gas Networks Ireland Innovation Challenge (GNI Challenge)**. This *pilot initiative* aims to incentivise and support research projects that will explore STEM-based solutions for utilisation of renewable gases by the energy industry in Ireland.

The specific objectives of the GNI Challenge are:

- To promote the development of new technologies that support the renewable gas industry in the delivery of National and EU policies to achieve Ireland's carbon neutrality;
- To accelerate the development and demonstration of technologies that have broad potential for utilisation by the renewable gas industry, and delivery of a positive impact in society;
- To foster collaboration between Gas Networks Ireland, researchers and Research Bodies.

The programme is intended to support pre-commercial/pre-deployment activities only, and as such development of existing products is <u>not</u> permitted.

3. Challenge Themes

To be considered for funding under the GNI Challenge, research proposals must align with at least one of the specific challenge themes outlined below. Each challenge theme includes a number of considerations that the applicants are expected to factor in when designing their projects.

a. Energy System Integration Challenge

The Energy System Integration (ESI) Challenge seeks to support the development of solutions to accelerate the optimisation and integration of the energy system in Ireland's transition to a low carbon economy. There are two themes under this challenge: (1) the integration of renewable gases at a local and regional level, and (2) the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) - based solutions for intelligent gas network performance diagnostics.

Theme 1 – Optimisation of Energy System in Irish Context

ESI is focused on coordinating the operation and planning of energy systems across multiple pathways and geographical scales to deliver reliable, cost-effective energy service with minimal environmental impact. With an urgent global need to reduce carbon emissions through the deployment of large renewable energy capacities while maintaining reliability and competitiveness, flexible energy systems are required. This flexibility can be achieved through integrating various systems by physically linking energy vectors, such as electricity, renewable gas, thermal, and biofuels; by coordinating these vectors across different infrastructures, such as water, data, agri-food, and transport; and through coordination of energy markets at all levels all the way down to customer level.

Developing coordinated systems through ESI analysis requires a proper understanding of the different actors involved, along with their motivations, incentives, and the information they have access to. A poorly executed energy transition could result in energy systems that lack technical integrity, social equity, and/or political acceptability.

Under this challenge theme, researchers are invited to investigate and develop new and innovative approaches relevant to the Irish context leading to the optimisation of the energy system at either local or regional level with a focus on integration of renewable gaseous fuels such as biomethane or hydrogen.

Consideration should be given to:

- local and national regulations,
- variability and predictability of supply (e.g., weather conditions, feedstock variability, etc),
- grid infrastructure capabilities and adaptability, as well as required operational practices,
- energy storage solutions, and
- market design, as creating market flexibility and incorporating demand response mechanisms are essential for effective ESI.

Theme 2 – AI for Intelligent Gas Network Performance Diagnostics

As part of broader ESI, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the energy industry is promising and will continue having a growing role in optimising energy production, distribution and consumption. Increasingly sophisticated AI-driven solutions can improve the efficiency of renewable energy sources, enhance network flexibility, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The adoption of AI in the energy sector has its challenges, including significant upfront costs associated with AI systems implementation and integration within existing infrastructure, some of which may be outdated and not compliant with modern AI solutions. Additional broad ranging considerations include data quality and its integration, provision of robust data security and compliance with data privacy regulations, regulatory and ethical considerations which can be complex and vary by sector; as well as acceptance and adoption of AI solutions by industry due to resistance to change and perceived job displacement concerns.

As part of the broader scope of the Energy System Integration challenge, applicants are invited to propose and develop AI techniques for intelligent gas network performance diagnostics to provide greater levels of prediction and visibility of required maintenance and timely interventions to improve the performance, efficiency and flexibility of gas network systems and equipment.

Such solutions should consider:

- gas industry specificity,
- system integration with new sources of fuel such as hydrogen and/or biomethane,
- ease of use as there may be a learning curve for users unfamiliar with AI systems, and
- data analytics, data security, and regulatory compliance.

b. Biomethane and Biohydrogen Production Challenge

The Biomethane and Biohydrogen Challenge seeks to support the development of solutions which improve the efficiency, efficacy and commercial viability of biomethane and biohydrogen production, including extraction and utilisation of the byproducts, to accelerate Ireland's transition to a low carbon economy.

Theme 3 – Biomethane Production

Ireland's National Biomethane Strategy[3] aims to produce up to 5.7 TWh per annum of biomethane domestically by 2030. Biomethane can be used as a direct substitute for fossil gas in various applications, improving gas security of supply and contributing towards Irelands targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Biomethane production takes place at anaerobic digestion (AD) Facilities, where other co-products are also produced. In line with EU and Irish bio-economy policies and plans, the transition and expansion of these production facilities into bio-refineries with a focus on wider scale valorisation of multiple co-products beyond biomethane should be achieved. Co-products can include, but are not limited to, biogenic hydrogen and CO_2, organic nitrogen, organic phosphorous, and organic potassium. Exploration of wider and alternative market potential for these products also has potential value, including for example their use in the production of alternative sustainable fuels, chemicals, or products.

This theme invites research teams to propose and develop new and innovative technologies, methods, and approaches to improve the efficiency, efficacy, and commercial viability of biomethane production in an Irish context.

Under this theme applications would be considered in areas including but not limited to:

- **Achieving Gas Quality Standards** – solutions to enhance biogas purification technology and thus enable production of biomethane to the defined quality standards and purity (>98%)[4][5] . Novel developments aimed at enhancing the reliability and effectiveness of biomethane purification at reduced capital and/or operational costs may also be considered.

[3] *National Biomethane Strategy.* Gov.ie. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d115e-national-biomethane-strategy/

[4] *GNI Technical Standards/Guidelines Biomethane-Producers-Technical-Handbook.* Gas Networks Ireland . Available at: https://www.gasnetworks.ie/docs/business/renewable-gas/Biomethane-Producers-Technical-Handbook.pdf

[5] *the EU Biomethane Industry Partnership* Available at: https://bip-europe.eu/

- **Resource Efficiency** – solutions to enhance energy efficiency and optimise water requirement of contemporary biogas/biomethane production and conditioning processes by devising novel pre-treatment technologies to increase biomass conversion efficiency; biogas upgrading technologies, and optimisation of existing digestion assets.[6]
- **Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) challenges** - solutions to support biomethane-producing facilities in achieving sustainability compliance objectives in their Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) in line with greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions targets from such facilities, defined by the EU Renewable Energy Directives (RED II & RED III)[7]. Solutions may include but are not limited to exploration of novel individual feedstocks and/or processes (including demonstration of the resultant LCA GHG factor(s)), and potential co-digestion blends required to achieve compliance with the LCA targets.
- **Quality Control of Feedstock** - novel and practical testing solutions to identify and segregate contaminated feedstocks in order to prevent toxic shock from contaminants and protect the productivity and health of anaerobic digestion systems.
- **Valorisation of Byproducts** – solutions to find new commercial opportunities for the byproducts from AD of feedstocks for the production of biomethane. Novel uses and innovative means of extraction of byproducts may be investigated with a view to maximising their commercial value to assist the transition and expansion of biomethane production facilities into biorefineries[3].

Theme 4 – Biohydrogen Production

Biohydrogen can be zero or even carbon negative if it is obtained from feedstocks such as wastes and manure. In addition, depending on the biohydrogen technology, biohydrogen production can generate useful co-products. [8]

Applicants are invited to investigate and develop novel and innovative means of sustainable biohydrogen production in an Irish context. LCA of the production process and future market prospects for proposed novel approaches must also be considered. The proposed approaches

[6] *Scaling-up Biogases Production.* European Biogas Association. Available at: https://www.europeanbiogas.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Shared-recommendations-on-research-needs.pdf

[7] *Renewable Energy Directives II and III*, European Commission, Energy, Climate Change, Environment. Available at: https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/renewable-energy/renewable-energy-directive-targets-and-rules/renewable-energy-directive_en

[8] *Decarbonising Europe's hydrogen production with biohydrogen* : https://www.europeanbiogas.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Decarbonising-Europes-hydrogen-production-with-biohydrogen.pdf

may be based on or around methodologies utilising bio-based feedstocks including, but not limited to:

- hydrogen extraction from syngas with potential for further carbon-based co-products,
- direct biohydrogen production from revised AD or other fermentation processes,
- bio-photolysis,
- microbial electrolysis,
- biomethane splitting.

NOTE: Established approaches to Grey, Blue and Green Hydrogen via electrolysis are outside the scope of this theme.

If potential applicants are unsure about the alignment of their proposed challenge/solution to the thematic area or remit of the call, they may wish to contact us at challenges@researchireland.ie in advance of preparing an application.

4. Programme Structure and Funding

The Research Ireland - GNI Innovation Challenge comprises three phases: **Concept**, **Seed** and **Prize Award** (see Figure 1).

Following receipt of proposals to the Programme, proposals will be reviewed by a Panel of independent international reviewers against the criteria outlined in Section 7 to select proposals to be awarded under the Programme and enter the Concept Phase. It is expected that up to five[9] teams will be funded for the Concept Phase. The Concept Phase will be 6-months in duration and conclude with a review by a panel of independent international reviewers who will evaluate the project progress and provide feedback/steering to maximise the potential of impact. It is expected that all teams deemed competitive and whose projects demonstrate high impact potential may progress to the Seed Phase. The Seed Phase will be 12-months in duration. At the conclusion of the Seed Phase, a review of progress by a panel of independent international reviewers will be undertaken with a view to selecting one overall Prize Award winner. The Prize Phase is expected to be up to 24-months in duration.

[9] Research Ireland reserves the right to fund a greater or fewer number of teams at either phase depending on quality and budget availability. In addition, the final funding decisions are at the sole and exclusive discretion of Research Ireland, which are arrived at following consideration and approval by the relevant Directorate and, if required, the Senior Leadership Team of Research Ireland.

Applications to the programme can request up to €200,000 in total direct costs over a duration of 18-months. Up to €50,000 can be allocated for use during the Concept Phase of the programme (Months 1–6) while the remaining request of up to €150,000 can be allocated to and will be accessible only during the Seed Phase (Months 7–18). At the conclusion of the Seed Phase, one team will be awarded the €1M Prize award.

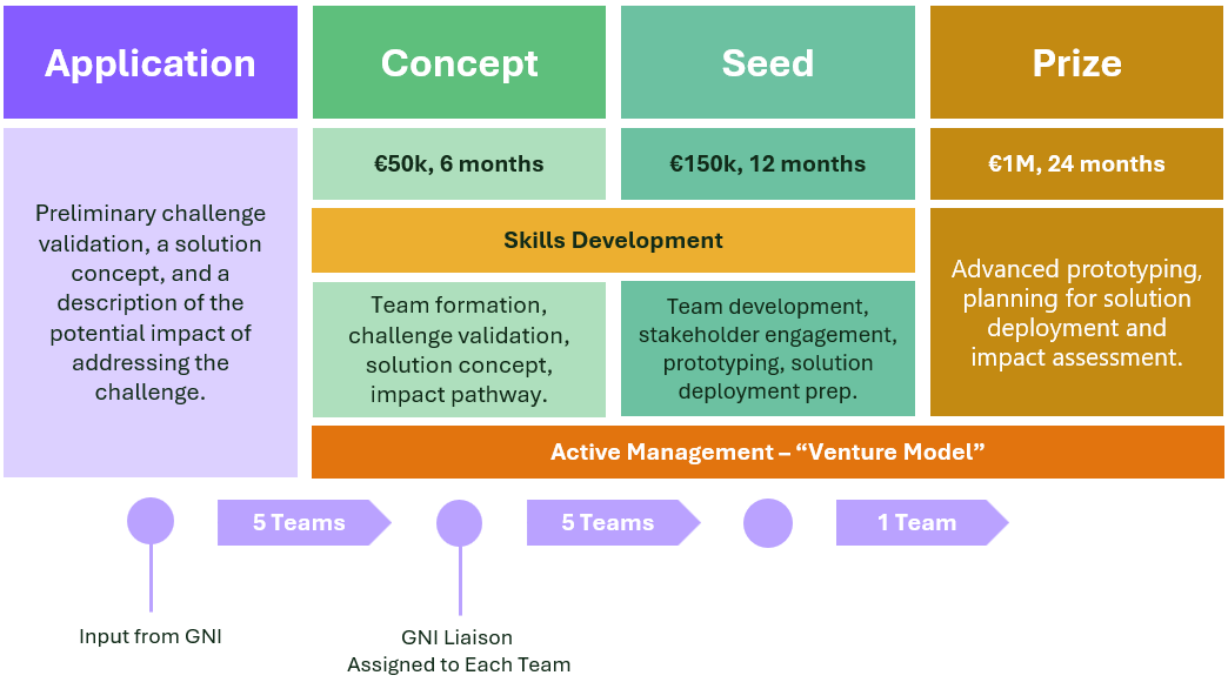

Figure 1. Phased structure of the Research Ireland - GNI Innovation Challenge

Purpose of the individual phases

a. Concept Phase

The Concept Phase is intended to support teams to develop a deeper understanding of the challenge/problem they propose to address and to explore the feasibility and viability of the solution concept presented in their application. Teams will be expected to further validate the challenge/problem selected, provide detail on the proposed solution and its implementation, and describe an impact pathway for their solution. As part of the impact pathway, teams must describe technical and non-technical barriers to be overcome, the opportunity associated with addressing those barriers and how the solution will achieve impact.

For this programme, **teams will be assigned a GNI Liaison** who will be a subject matter expert on the challenge/problem to be addressed. It is expected that the GNI Liaison will become an integral part of the team and play a key role during the Concept Phase providing technical input/insights as well as assisting teams to gain insight on procedural, organisational, safety, and/or regulatory issues that may affect project development. The GNI Liaison will also assist teams in broader engagement with other GNI stakeholders or site visits to observe facilities or equipment.

During the Concept Phase, the core team will have the opportunity to recruit additional team members with relevant skills and knowledge to support the objectives of the proposal. It may be appropriate for a broader range of stakeholders and beneficiaries to be considered for inclusion as members of a team as it expands.

b. Seed Phase

The Seed Phase enables teams to undertake further stakeholder engagement and collaborative co-development of a prototype. The development of this prototype should be guided by the needs of stakeholders and beneficiaries and be informed by key measures of success identified through engagement with stakeholders and beneficiaries. During this prototyping process, the team should commence planning for further development and deployment of the solution.

The programme will only support pre-commercial/pre-deployment activities, however, as part of the Seed Phase it may be necessary for successful applicants to consider potential commercialisation routes as part of the project to fully scope solution deployment. In this context, teams should take into consideration the necessary requirements to facilitate this process, and it is anticipated that the collective skill set of the challenge team will support such activity.

c. Prize Award

A total Prize Award of €1M will be available. The winning team will develop an advanced prototype during the Prize Phase and finalise their plan for solution deployment with a view to translating the solution within this phase or shortly after the project end.

NOTE: Research Ireland reserves the right not to grant the Prize Award if the review panel does not identify a winning team. Please refer to Section 7 for detailed information on the review and evaluation process.

Skills Development

In addition to the provision of funding, Research Ireland will organise training workshops during the Concept and Seed Phases to support the skills and knowledge development of the teams. The topics of these workshops are selected to complement team activities within the specific phases and include, for example, Design Thinking, Theory of Change, and Communication Skills. Further details of these workshops will be provided to teams successful in securing funding under the programme. The core team members will be expected to attend the training workshops.

5. Who Can Apply?

a. Team composition

The Research Ireland – Gas Networks Ireland Innovation Challenge is intended to support highly motivated, interdisciplinary and collaborative research teams, committed to developing transformative and sustainable solutions that will contribute to the challenge themes outlined in Section 3. It is expected that teams will encompass a range of technical and non-technical skills to address activities associated with problem understanding and solution development. Teams must include expertise in STEM research area underpinning the proposed solution, but should also include relevant knowledge in complementary areas, such as, for example, economics, market design, regulatory compliance, etc. As such, consideration should be given to the broader challenge/solution context which may require input from experts in disciplines outside of STEM such as the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS).

Applications to the GNI Challenge must identify a core applicant/leadership team comprising:

- **Team Lead** (Lead Applicant) - It is expected that the Team Lead will have responsibility for managing the activities of the team, will provide technical leadership and have overall responsibility for delivery of research programme objectives. The Team Lead is expected to have a demonstrable track record relevant to the proposed solution.
- **Team Co-Lead** (Co-lead Applicant) – It is expected that the Team Co-Lead will provide research leadership as part of the research programme and should bring complementary technical/disciplinary expertise to that of the Team Lead.

Following successful application, **a *GNI Liaison* will be assigned to work with the team lead and co-lead**. The GNI Liaison will be integral to the team and will work as part of the team to provide insights as well as organisational, operational or mission context to support the team in

understanding and validating problems, and the development of a solution, facilitate access to stakeholder networks and provide relevant policy context.

Teams successful at application stage will have the opportunity to expand during the course of their award and be able to recruit additional researchers (e.g. at postgraduate or postdoctoral career stage) or collaborators (e.g., researchers, beneficiaries, end-users). Applications may reference individuals outside the core team who are anticipated to play a future role as team members. In such cases, it is important to highlight the discipline and skill set that these individuals will bring to the team.

b. Eligibility Criteria

Applications will be accepted where the Lead Applicant and Co-Applicant satisfy the following eligibility criteria.

- Be a **member of academic staff** of an eligible Research Body[10] (permanent or with a contract that covers the period of the award),

  or
- Be a **contract researcher** with a contract that covers the period of the award (contract may be subject to receipt of the award).

  and
- Hold a PhD or equivalent. Please consult the Policy on PhD Equivalence[11] for further information*.

Applications will not be accepted where the lead applicant or co-applicant is a postgraduate researcher (e.g., MSc, MEng or PhD student).

In cases where the Lead and/or Co-Lead is a postdoctoral researcher, the application must include a Letter of Support from an established researcher confirming they will act as a mentor to the Lead/Co-Lead for the duration of the award (see Section 8i for further details).

NOTE: Members of the Core Team (Lead Applicant and Co-Applicant) are permitted to be named on only one application to the programme. Applicants who are already Lead or Co-Lead on an active Research Ireland Challenge Award (including a National Challenge Fund award) may be required to provide a plan to Research Ireland as to how they will manage concurrent awards if successful.

[10] https://www.researchireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Research-Ireland-Eligible-Research-Body-Policy.pdf
[11] Policy on PhD Equivalence

**It is recognised that in certain disciplines relevant to this call, such as engineering or international development, research-active members of academic staff may not hold a PhD or equivalent. Such research-active staff members may be considered eligible to participate as a Team Lead or Co-Lead but must confirm their eligibility with Research Ireland in advance of submission of an application. Requests must be made by the Research Office of the host research body to Research Ireland by e-mail (challenges@researchireland.ie) and should include a completed narrative CV template, which must demonstrate evidence of appropriate research experience. In such cases, only current members of academic staff will be considered. The track record of eligible team members and their role in the team will be assessed as part of the review process. Eligibility for this call will not be considered in the assessment of eligibility for other Research Ireland funding calls and does not correspond to confirmation of PhD equivalence*[12] .

Conflict of Interest

Research Ireland recognises that applicants may have a prior relationship with an industry partner engaged in an application for funding to Research Ireland (e.g., industry consultancy role, founder of an academic spin-out company) which may be perceived as a conflict of interest. Where a potential conflict of interest exists, Research Ireland requires that it is disclosed by the applicant to Research Ireland and their Research Body and that any such situations are managed by the Research Body in accordance with the principles and mandates laid out in **Ireland's National IP Protocol 2019**.[13]

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy

Research Ireland is committed to building equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) within the Irish research and innovation sector. The Agency recognises that excellent research stems from diverse and inclusive teams, which reflect our society and the communities we serve. As such, Research Ireland aspires to proactively lead in driving the EDI agenda forward through the research and research teams that it funds.

In Research Ireland's External Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy 2023-2028[14]. increasing the number of women and members of Historically Underserved Communities[15] in Applicant Teams are key objectives. As such, women and members of Historically Underserved

[12] This should be noted, for example, for the purpose of ensuring appropriate supervisory arrangements for PhD students. See https://www.researchireland.ie/about/policies/

[13] https://www.knowledgetransferireland.com/Reports-Publications/Ireland-s-National-IP-Protocol-2019-.pdf

[14] Gender and Maternity

[15] For the purposes of this Strategy, Historically Underserved Community encompasses a broad and diverse range of historically marginalised groups including but not limited to the nine protected grounds established in the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 and socioeconomic status.

Communities are strongly encouraged to apply to this programme. Further details on application submission and success rates by gender (binary) can be found for historic programmes on the Research Ireland website.

Gender data fields on Research Ireland's Grants and Awards Management System, SESAME, have been expanded to encompass more inclusive gender identifiers. These expanded gender identifier fields support those objectives described in Research Ireland's External EDI Strategy, which aims to be a key driver of an inclusive research culture, lead in minimising barriers to participation in the research endeavour and ensure that its investment reflects the input of researchers that are representative of society, and thus the outputs are relevant to society. Gender data gathered will inform the diversity of the applicant group. It will help to inform future iterations of this and similar programme calls. The data gathered will also inform how we can best improve the representation of other Historically Underserved Communities, including individuals from underrepresented genders, in our portfolio of grants awarded.

Furthermore, as part of its EDI Strategy, Research Ireland also aims to increase awareness of the sex and gender dimension in research, by requesting that researchers demonstrate that they have considered any potential biological sex and/or socio-cultural gender aspects in their proposed research programme.

6. Programme requirements on State Aid and Intellectual Property Management

As per Research Ireland's Grant Conditions (inclusive of Research Ireland's General Terms & Conditions[16], Letters of Offer and Research Ireland Policy documents[17]), all Research Ireland funding granted is subject to, and must be compliant with, State aid legislation based on Article 107(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)[18]. Namely, research activities undertaken as part of a Grant awarded under the Research Ireland – Gas Networks Ireland Innovation Challenge, and agreed to subject to Research Ireland 's Grant Conditions, must be "non-economic" in nature and be designed to ensure that any funding received does not, directly or indirectly, give rise to the granting of State aid.

[16] https://www.researchireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Research-Ireland-Grant-GTCs.pdf
[17] https://www.researchireland.ie/about/policies/
[18] Commission Notice on the notion of State aid as referred to in Article 107(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union TABLE OF CONTENTS (europa.eu)

The arrangements related to the management of IP arising out of the Research Ireland - GNI Innovation Challenge Programme are the responsibility of the Research Bodies and must comply with the practices and procedures described in the national IP protocol document Ireland's National IP Protocol 2019[19]. They shall reflect the collaborative nature of the project, the level of commitment of partners, and compliance with State aid regulations.

Where a proposed programme of research involves collaboration with an 'undertaking'[20] or industry party, the activities ***must*** comply with the definition of "effective collaboration" and the conditions relating to the allocation between the parties of the results and/or intellectual property rights arising from the collaboration as per the 2022 Framework for State Aid for research and development and innovation (2022/C 414/01) (the "Framework"[21]). Research Ireland has set out guidance to support how the programme of research or project is developed and undertaken in accordance with these conditions. See 'Guidance on State Aid for applicants to, and recipients of, Research Ireland Grant funding' for further information.[22]

NOTE: Researchers funded under the Research Ireland - GNI Innovation Challenge 2025 will work closely with the GNI as part of this programme and **will be required to sign a Collaborative Research (or Intellectual Property Rights) Agreement with the Gas Networks Ireland prior to any research activities commencing.** The CRA should clearly outline arrangements for Intellectual property (IP), insurance, liability, and warranties.

Where a proposed programme of research activities involves a collaboration with an industry party or "undertaking", for all or part of the term of the Grant, applicants must demonstrate compliance with the conditions of "effective collaboration" and complete and **"Industry Collaboration Form" (ICF).** The ICF is to assist applicants in defining the relationship with the relevant industry partners in order to comply with the conditions of "effective collaboration". Research Ireland require that the ICF is completed and returned to Research Ireland on or before the date that the Collaborative Research (or Intellectual Property Rights) Agreement has been 'agreed' with, or signed by, the relevant partner(s). For the GNI Challenge, the form should be submitted by the Principal Investigator and uploaded to SESAME. A **download of the ICF and**

[19] https://www.knowledgetransferireland.com/Reports-Publications/Ireland-s-National-IP-Protocol-2019-.pdf
[20] The concept of an "undertaking" under EU competition law rules is an entity that is engaged in an "economic activity" regardless of its legal status or the way that it is financed. An activity is economic in nature when it involves offering goods or services on a market.
[21] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2022.414.01.0001.01.ENG
[22] https://www.researchireland.ie/about/policies/

related guidance, inclusive of an FAQ document, can be found on the Research Ireland website.[23]

A copy of each CRA arising from the Grant must be held on file by the relevant Research Body. Research Ireland may request a copy of the signed CRA to be provided (as advised in the Grant Terms & Conditions) and held on file by Research Ireland for audit purposes. Further information on the role of the CRA and Research Ireland 's ex-post State aid verification checks (i.e., on-going checks after the granting of funds / partial funds), the ICF and related guidance, as well as a detailed FAQ document can be found on the Research Ireland website.

The costs of the proposed programme of research activities should be calculated on the basis of generally accepted accounting principles. Grant holders are required to put in place a full economic costing model for all activities carried out with Research Ireland funds. Where Research Ireland funded Research Bodies carry out activities of both economic and non-economic nature, the costs, funding and revenues of each of the two activities must be clearly accounted for separately. [24] [25]

Applicants are advised to seek independent legal advice in advance of applying to Research Ireland for funding where further clarification is sought.

7. Programme Review Process and Criteria

San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)

Research Ireland is a signatory to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)[26] and, as such is aligning its review and evaluation processes with DORA principles. Research Ireland has reinforced its commitment to the core principles by joining DORA as a member[27]. To this end, all types of research output are recognised, and Research Ireland is committed to assessing the quality and impact of research through means other than journal-

[23] https://www.researchireland.ie/about/policies/state-aid/

[24] Where Research Ireland funded Research Centres engage in both economic and non-economic activities, the economic uses must consume exactly the same inputs (such as material, equipment, labour and fixed capital) as the non- economic activities and the capacity allocated each year to such economic activities does not exceed 20 % of the Research Centre's overall annual capacity

[25] Please see paragraph 21 of the Framework: "Where the research organisation or research infrastructure is used almost exclusively for a non-economic activity, its funding may fall outside State aid rules in its entirety(41), provided that the economic use remains purely ancillary, that is to say corresponds to an activity which is directly related to and necessary for the operation of the research organisation or research infrastructure or intrinsically linked to its main non- economic use, and which is limited in scope"

[26] https://sfdora.org/

[27] Contributor level membership.

based metrics and research performance-based metrics such as impact factors and H-index. In the spirit of supporting open research and as a signatory to Ireland's National Action Plan for Open Research 2022-2030[28] and as a signatory of Plan S,[29] Research Ireland will also consider a commitment to making data and other types of research open and accessible. To complement these activities and further reinforce Research Ireland 's commitment to the overarching objectives of DORA, Research Ireland became a signatory to the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment[30] and thus became a member of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA).[31]

The GNI Challenge programme involves three stages of review: the Application, the end of Concept Phase, and the end of Seed Phase. Panel members secured by Research Ireland are internationally based experts in their respective fields and may be drawn from a range of backgrounds relevant to the challenge programme, including academia, industry, investment and civil society.

a. Application stage review

Following submission, applications are checked for eligibility[32]. As part of the eligibility checks, input may be sought from the GNI on the alignment of applications to the challenges identified. Teams that submit applications that are not deemed eligible under the programme or do not strongly align with the programme remit will be notified and their application withdrawn. Following these checks, eligible applications are then assigned to a panel of international experts secured by Research Ireland. Subject matter experts from GNI will provide input on each application for consideration by the Panel. This input will be used to inform the recommendations of the application review panel.

Applications will be assessed by the Panel against the evaluation criteria provided below (Section 7c). Only applications deemed to be of both excellent scientific/engineering/technical quality and demonstrating strong impact potential will be recommended for funding by the Panel. Applicant teams whose proposals do not proceed will be notified by Research Ireland.

[28] https://norf.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/National-Action-Plan-for-Open-Research-webversion.pdf
[29] https://www.coalition-s.org/
[30] https://coara.eu/app/uploads/2022/09/2022_07_19_rra_agreement_final.pdf
[31] https://coara.eu/
[32] Applications are checked for compliance with: non-technical mandatory criteria (e.g. all sections complete, page numbers not exceeded); technical mandatory criteria (e.g. any publication and prior funding requirements, alignment with the legal remit of Research Ireland, where required); and any other requirements outlined in the Call Document.

The identity of international experts who conduct the application stage reviews shall remain confidential and will not be disclosed to applicants. Research Ireland shall not be liable for the release of information concerning proposals to third parties by those international peer reviewers involved in the review process.

Reviewers engaged by Research Ireland are required to abide by the Reviewer Code of Conduct[33]. The submission of an application to Research Ireland shall be construed as consent by the applicant(s) to participate in the peer-review process and for their application to be shared with GNI. Research Ireland reserves the right to return applications without review where they do not meet the eligibility criteria.

b. Concept and Seed phase progress reviews

The review of progress at the end of the Concept and Seed Phases will be undertaken by a sitting panel of international experts. This process will involve the completion and submission of a progress report to Research Ireland at both stages (approx. 4 weeks before the panel date) and an interview with the Panel. Guidance on progress reports will be provided to applicants at the start of each phase.

At the conclusion of the Concept Phase, representatives from the team will be invited to present their concept to a panel of international experts drawn from a range of sectors including academia, industry, entrepreneurship, and investment. This Panel will assess the progress in the Concept Phase and plans for the Seed Phase against the evaluation criteria below (Section 7c) and make recommendations to the teams to maximise their impact potential. Based on the outcome of the panel review, all teams deemed competitive and whose projects demonstrate high impact potential may progress to the Seed Phase as finalists. During the 12-month Seed Phase, teams may use the remaining award amount. Those teams that do not progress at the end of the Concept Phase will have their funding decommitted.

Prior to completion of the Seed Phase, the remaining teams will submit a progress report to Research Ireland, followed by a final presentation and interview with a sitting panel of international experts. Based on the evaluation criteria below (Section 7c), the Panel will assess progress made in developing the prototype and validation of the deployment strategy within the Seed Phase, plans for the next phase, and the potential for societal and economic impact. At the end of this assessment, the panel will recommend an overall winning team that will receive the

[33] https://www.researchireland.ie/about/policies/

Prize award. If the review panel does not identify a winning team, a Prize Award may not be granted.

Research Ireland reserves the right to modify the review process. Applicants will be notified of any relevant modification to the review procedure. The final funding decisions are at the sole and exclusive discretion of Research Ireland.

c. Evaluation Criteria

At all stages (Application, the end of Concept and Seed Phases), projects will be assessed based on the following criteria:

- **Quality, experience and ambition of the applicant team** – Consideration will be given to the team's ambition, complementarity of expertise, the appropriateness of its composition for addressing the proposed challenge and that necessary partnerships/collaborations are in place to deliver the proposed impact. Consideration will also be given to the quality, significance and relevance of the individual team members' research track record and key achievements (in particular, generation and translation of knowledge, development of Individuals, leadership, teamwork and collaboration, delivering societal or economic impact, and stakeholder engagement[34]). The review will make note of individuals' career stages and research disciplines, taking into account any periods of leave.
- **Significance of the challenge/problem** – Consideration will be given to recognition and articulation of understanding of the significance of the problem identified and any insights contributing to its formulation. Any stakeholder/beneficiary engagement undertaken in validation of the problem will also be considered.
- **Novelty of the proposed solution, including its potential to deliver disruptive innovation** – Consideration will be given to the innovation potential of the overall proposed solution, including the novelty of the technology, comprehension of the current state of the art, value for money, the sex and gender dimension etc. Note that novelty may arise through combination or convergence of technologies in a new or unforeseen way.
- **Transformative societal impact potential of the solution** – Consideration will be given to the potential for the solution to create significant beneficial societal change or impact. Any stakeholder/beneficiary engagement undertaken in validation of the solution will also be considered.

[34] Examples are provided in the Applicant CV template, which is available on the Programme website.

- **Feasibility of execution within the budget and timeframe permitted** – Consideration will be given to the feasibility of delivering the project within the budget and timeframe of the Concept and Seed Phases and likelihood that this can lead to successful delivery of the solution during the Prize Award Phase.

NOTE: The Sex and Gender Dimension Statement will be evaluated as part of **Significance of the challenge/problem, Novelty of the proposed solution, Transformative societal impact potential of the solution** and **Feasibility of execution** components of the review, if relevant.

8. Application Process

Applications to the Research Ireland - GNI Innovation Challenge Programme must be submitted through SESAME, Research Ireland's online grants and awards management system in advance of the application deadline. Full details of this application process can be found in the **Research Ireland – Gas Networks Ireland Innovation Challenge SESAME Guide** available for download from the call webpage.

Applying through SESAME involves completion of an online form with details including team members, project idea summary, alignment to research areas, and requested budget. In addition, applicants will be required to upload information in PDF documents. These uploaded documents must use the templates provided on the call webpage.

If your submission relates to a previous unsuccessful application to any Research Ireland scheme, a statement referencing the previous application and explaining the differences must be provided as part of the SESAME application and must refer to reviewer comments where relevant. This statement will assist Research Ireland staff in the assessment of the eligibility of a revised application and will not be shared with reviewers. See Resubmission policy for further details[35]. Given the time commitment involved with leading on a Research Ireland Challenge award, Research Ireland may follow up with individuals managing other/multiple Research Ireland grants to provide justification and rationale for how they would manage two or more major awards. This information is provided for planning purposes by Research Ireland staff and will not be shared with reviewers.

[35] Resubmission of Grant Proposals

Sections of the Application

Applications to the GNI Challenge comprise several sections as described below.

a. Summary of Idea

This section of the application allows you to provide a summary of the idea you are proposing. Ensure that you describe what elements of the challenge/problem you intend to address and the proposed solution. Describe what is novel or unconventional about the approach, why you expect it to succeed and how it will deliver impact.

b. Research Alignment

This section includes drop-down questions for the applicants to identify the research areas most relevant to their proposed projects.

c. Pre-Application Stakeholder Engagement Details

It is important that you liaise with GNI stakeholders in advance of application submission. This is to ensure that the ideas proposed in your application are relevant to the challenges identified. You should provide evidence for the engagement that took place as part of an application, including information about the engagement (i.e. name of stakeholder(s), when meetings/calls took place or how often) along with any key insights about the challenge or problem to be addressed.

To facilitate these initial engagements, Research Ireland, together with GNI will host a webinar for researchers to provide further context for the call. Furthermore, to facilitate researchers in gaining a greater understanding of challenges and operational context and requirements, an open day may be organized whereby researchers can visit GNI installations/facilities to see equipment and speak with GNI subject matter experts. Individual follow-on sessions with experts may also be arranged. Further details of these arrangements will be provided as part of call information webinars and on the programme call website.

d. Team, Challenge/Problem, Solution & Societal Impact

For this section, please download the application form template from the challenge website. The completed application form should be converted to PDF and uploaded in SESAME as part of your application.

- **Team Profile:** Applicants should provide a clear description on how, through its composition, complementarity and formation, the team brings a unique perspective in addressing this problem. Applicants are advised not to provide biographies of team

members rather to convey the team's ambition and its ability to deliver. Information on the team will be complemented by the curricula vitae submitted as part of the application;

- **Challenge/Problem:** Applicants should describe clearly the specific challenge/problem that will be addressed, articulate their understanding of it and identify key issues or barriers in addressing this problem. As part of this description, insights from engaging with stakeholders/beneficiaries, including subject matter experts from GNI, and how this has validated the problem should be included;
- **Solution:** Applicants should clearly describe the solution concept proposed. This should include a description of how the proposed solution is novel and/or unconventional in its approach, what is its current stage of technical development, what is the current state-of-the-art and how will the proposed approach overcome current barriers. Applicants should include consideration of ethical or regulatory issues where relevant. Evidence that the solution is feasible/viable associated risks should be provided. Applicants may consider providing a number of high-level milestones/deliverables (and achievement times);
- **Societal Impact:** Applicants should outline the societal impact that their proposed solution can achieve in Ireland as well as in the broader renewable energy landscape. Applicants should outline outcomes their solution is expected to deliver, as well as an estimated timeframe for delivery.

NOTE: As described in Section 4, successful teams will be expected to further refine and validate their understanding of the challenge/problem and the solution concept through stakeholder engagement during the Concept Phase. Research Ireland and GNI will provide the teams with guidance and training during this process.

e. Ethical Issues

In preparing your application to the programme, please consult the Guidance for Applicants on Ethical and Scientific Issues.[36]

[36] Guidance on Ethical and Scientific Issues

f. Sex and Gender Dimension in Research Statement

In accordance with the Research Ireland External Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy[37], all applicants must complete a statement articulating the consideration of biological sex and/or social gender variables in their research programme. Please consult the Guidance for Applicants on Ethical and Scientific Issues for resources on how to address the sex and/or gender dimension of research in your grant.

Do not include information on how you have addressed gender equality, diversity and inclusion in your research team/environment; this should be addressed in the body of the proposal and/or in your CV, as appropriate.

To complete this section, please consider the following questions:

1. Is sex as a biological variable taken into account in the research design, methods, analysis and interpretation, and/or dissemination of findings?
2. Is gender as a socio-cultural factor taken into account in the research design, methods, analysis and interpretation, and/or dissemination of findings?

If the answer is yes, please describe how sex and/or gender considerations will be integrated into your research proposal. If no, please explain why sex and/or gender are not applicable to your research proposal.

g. Budget

This section should be used to describe the budget (direct costs) and resources needed. Up to €50,000 can be allocated for use during the Concept Phase of the programme (Months 1–6) while the remaining request of up to €150,000 can be allocated to and will be accessible only during the Seed Phase (Months 7–18). Given the phased structure of the programme, the requested budget and resources for the Seed phase may not be as detailed. It is recommended that applicants maximise the budget requested at each stage. In this section:

- Provide a breakdown of the indicative eligible direct costs (in €) associated with the application.
- Please review the Grant Budget Policy and Team Member Salary Scales for eligible costs and salary levels for research staff. [38]

[37] Gender and Maternity
[38] https://www.researchireland.ie/about/policies/

- Please include any subcontracting to be undertaken in the Materials & Consumables category.
- Please provide a high-level justification for Concept Phase requests

Teaching replacement costs (Technological Universities/Institutes of Technology)

Team Leads and Co-Leads in Technological Universities (TUs) or in Institutes of Technology (IoTs) are permitted to apply for teaching replacement of up to a maximum of 50% of their teaching load for the duration of each phase of the programme. Salary scales for replacement lecturers must be reasonable and justified appropriately within the budget justification. Teaching replacement requests must be pro-rata and proportional to the time commitment to the award. It is noted that postdoctoral researchers based in any eligible research body who are acting as a Team Lead or Co-Lead may include up to 100% of their salary as part of the budget request in line with their time commitment to the project.

In addition to direct costs, Research Ireland also makes an indirect or overhead contribution to the host research body, which is reflected as a percentage (30%) of the direct costs (excluding equipment). Overheads are payable as a contribution to the Research Body for the indirect costs of hosting research programmes funded by Research Ireland and are intended to enable the research body to develop internationally competitive research infrastructure and support services.

h. Curricula Vitae

CVs of the Lead and Co-Lead Applicants, using the template provided on the Research Ireland – GNI Innovation Challenge call webpage, must be completed and uploaded. **Please click on "Save Draft" after upload.** The current template allows for the provision of additional information such as that relating to periods of leave from research, where relevant. **Reference to indicators/metrics such as journal impact factor, h-index and total number of publications are not permitted. If these indicators/metrics are included, they will be redacted prior to expert review.**

The CVs of the GNI Liaison, collaborators, or research team members are not required, but appropriate references to experience and expertise of team members can be made in the Team section of the application form. **Reference to indicators/metrics such as journal impact**

factor, h-index and total number of publications are not permitted. If these indicators/metrics are included, they will be redacted prior to expert review.

i. Letters of Support

As part of an application to the GNI Challenge, Letters of Support must be provided as follows:

- Letter(s) of Support from the **Host Research Bod(y/ies) of the Lead and Co-Lead applicants,** which should comment on how the applicant`s expertise aligns with the proposed research, confirm eligibility of the applicants, and detail the infrastructure and services available to the applicant as relevant for the proposal. In addition, in cases where team members will be transferring from another active Research Ireland grant, an outline of the management plan (i.e., a description of how the individual will be replaced on the original award) to assure how these awards progress satisfactorily should be provided. Also note that the Host Research Body Letter of Support should contain a description of the institutional policy regarding management of conflicts of interest. Members of the applicant team may be located at different eligible research bodies. In this case, funding awarded under the programme will be administered through the Research Body of the Lead Applicant.
- Where any applicant is a postdoctoral researcher, a Letter of Support from **an established researcher from the same Host Research Body endorsing the postdoctoral researcher** must be provided. This Letter of Support must confirm that the established researcher has agreed to act as mentor for the duration of the award. In cases where the established researcher is not the current mentor/supervisor, the Letter of Support must outline how this situation will be managed and must be countersigned by the current mentor/supervisor of the postdoctoral researcher. The Letter of Support must include details of the postdoctoral researcher's current role and funding arrangements including remuneration level. The grant identification code and grant title under which the postdoctoral researcher is currently funded should also be provided. If an established researcher is co-applying with the postdoctoral applicant, they can be the mentor of their co-applicant, if appropriate.

NOTE: No additional Letters of Support may be included at the application stage. Any additional/unsolicited Letters of Support will be removed from an application.

Research Body Approval

For an application to be accepted, it must be authorised for submission by the host research body of the Lead Applicant. It should be noted that Research Body submission of an application confirms that the Research Ireland Grant General Terms & Conditions have been read and understood[39]. Submission may only be made by an authorised Research Body representative (e.g. the Research Office). In particular, the Research Body is approving:

- The eligibility of the applicants;
- That the applicants are, or will be upon receipt of the grant, recognised as employees of the Research Body for the duration of the grant;
- That the requested budget including salaries/stipends, equipment, travel and consumables are in line with accepted institutional guidelines;
- The availability of infrastructure within the institution as outlined by the applicant in the research proposal;
- That the proposed research programme has not been funded by other sources;
- That relevant ethical and regulatory approval has been or will be sought and must be granted prior to the award commencing;
- That relevant licences will be in place at the time of grant;
- That the details provided in relation to research funding history i.e., current, pending or expired grants, as detailed in the application, are valid and accurate;
- That permission from all team members and collaborators has been obtained, such that Research Ireland may receive their personal information, and may process such data for the purpose of peer review;
- That the information supplied in the application is correct and the research proposal is the applicant's own work.

Research Ireland 's Grant Conditions shall govern the administration of Research Ireland grants and awards to the exclusion of this and any other oral, written, or recorded statement.

9. Data Management Plan

Good data governance and stewardship are key components of good research practice. **While Data Management Plans are not required to be submitted at the application stage of this programme, teams are encouraged to consider data management at an early stage in their**

[39] https://www.researchireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Research-Ireland-Grant-GTCs.pdf

project. At the end of the Seed Phase, as part of the Seed Phase Progress Report, teams will be required to provide a 2-page Data Management Plan (DMP). In preparing this plan, consideration should be given to Guidance on Data Management Plans.[40] A DMP is a living document which details the procedures for careful handling of data and other research outputs. A DMP follows the data through the lifecycle of the programme of research[41], from collection to analysis and interpretation, sharing and dissemination, and long-term storage.

DMPs will be reviewed to ensure that they contain sufficient information on practices and standards as guided below; this assessment will be incorporated into the overall scoring criteria for the Research Programme section of the application. Although practices and standards vary across disciplines, Research Ireland recommends the use of Science Europe DMP templates and guidelines. Each DMP should include the following as appropriate to the programme or project[42]:

- Data description and collection or re-use of existing data
- Documentation and data quality
- Storage and backup during the research process
- Legal and ethical requirements, codes of conduct
- Data sharing and long-term preservation

Data management responsibilities and resources including institutional or project-specific resources dedicated to managing data and ensuring adherence with the FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Re-usable).

10. Research Ireland 's Policies and Positions

In addition to complying with the Grant terms and Conditions, applicants are expected to be familiar and consult with Research Ireland policies/positions and with all relevant national policies when preparing their application to any programme. All members involved in the funded research should be apprised of the following non-exhaustive list of relevant policies. Please note that some policies are being updated to reflect the expanded remit of Research Ireland and in the interim, the existing polices of the legacy agencies should be followed.

[40] https://www.researchireland.ie/about/policies/

[41] Research Ireland -funded research programmes, can range from a single research project to a collection of research projects encompassed in several work packages. The data management plan should reflect the relevant standards for individual research projects while describing a cohesive approach to managing data across the overall programme of research as appropriate.

[42] Based primarily on guidance provided by Science Europe: https://www.scienceeurope.org/our-resources/practical-guide-to-the-international-alignment-of-research-data-management/ and supplemented by guidance from the European Research Council of the European Commission: https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/ERC_info_document-Open_Research_Data_and_Data_Management_Plans.pdf

- Animal Usage
- Research Integrity
- Maternity Supplement
- Appeals Process
- Child Protection
- Data Protection Policy
- Open Research
- Data Management

As noted, Research Ireland's policies are under development and will be added to the Research Ireland website once finalised. For information on other policies:

- Visit https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/ if grant was formerly with Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)
- Visit https://research.ie/about-us/policies/ if grant was formerly with the Irish Research Council (IRC)

For any questions concerning Research Ireland, SFI or IRC policies, please email researchpolicy@researchireland.ie.

11. Further Information

Further information, including a guide to submitting an application on SESAME, an FAQ document, and the application templates related to the Research Ireland – Gas Networks Ireland Innovation Challenge is available on the programme webpage. For additional queries please contact: challenges@researchireland.ie