

Responsive funding in the NIHR SDO programme: call for proposals from researchers for follow-on empirical studies, evidence synthesis, and scoping reviews for future research needs
Specification Document (REF: 10_1008): CALL FOR PROPOSALS

1. Introduction

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Service Delivery and Organisation Programme (SDO) has established a responsive funding workstream; this is the second call for proposals. We anticipate spending about £3 million pa once this funding workstream is well established, and there are two calls for proposals each year. The SDO Studies Panel, chaired by Professor Lorna McKee assesses proposals submitted to this workstream.

Our aim in establishing a responsive funding workstream is to provide a mechanism by which researchers can bring ideas, topics and areas of research need to the attention of the SDO programme which would not otherwise be addressed by our commissioned research programme. The selection process will be shorter than the Commissioned Programme where needs are identified through extensive liaison and dialogue with evidence users in the NHS.

The Studies Panel funding workstream is not wholly open. Each call is likely to identify a number of areas in which we are seeking proposals. These will include particular research topics, or research approaches, or other targeted areas of work. This second call identifies three areas: follow-on empirical studies, evidence synthesis, and scoping reviews for future research needs. We are seeking proposals for projects of up to 24 months in duration, and up to £300,000 in cost. More details are given below in section 4.

All proposals submitted to this responsive funding stream will be assessed in the same way as those submitted to the two other workstreams in the SDO programme; firstly for importance to the NHS, secondly for scientific quality. More details of this process are given in section 5.

We are encouraging researchers to develop proposals tailored to this call. Proposals that have been submitted elsewhere and have failed to be funded can be considered though researchers must make this explicit. Applicants also need to clarify whether their proposal is currently under consideration by another research funder. If so, applicants are asked to contact NETSCC, SDO. In addition, researchers are advised that unless a proposal fits the criteria of this specific call *and* meets the criteria for funding of the SDO programme, it will not be considered. Proposals must reflect the broad objectives of the SDO programme and address the primary audiences for SDO commissioned research as detailed below.

2. The SDO programme objectives

The Service Delivery and Organisation programme (SDO) is one of the national research programmes of the NHS in England and Wales, and is a constituent programme of the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The NIHR SDO Programme improves health outcomes for people by:

- Commissioning research and producing research evidence that improves practice in relation to the organisation and delivery of health care, and

- Building research capability and capacity amongst those who manage organise and deliver services – improving their understanding of the research literature and how to use research evidence.

The primary audience for the research which the SDO programme commissions, is decision makers in the NHS in England and Wales – particularly managers and leaders in NHS organisations. We focus our research commissioning on topics and areas where we think research evidence can make a significant contribution to improving decision making, and so to improving the organisation and delivery of healthcare to patients.

Further information on the SDO programme, including a list of past, current and recently commissioned projects, can be found on the SDO website: www.sdo.nihr.ac.uk.

3. Background to this call

This is the second fully responsive funding call from the SDO programme. A limited open call scheme has operated in previous years though most of the SDO programme budget has been invested in commissioned workstreams where research needs are identified through a systematic process of assessment and prioritisation, commissioning briefs are developed, and then a call for proposals in response to those briefs is issued. While commissioning briefs rely on researchers to frame specific research questions and determine appropriate methodologies and approaches, they do set clear boundaries for the topics to be explored.

Responsive funding programmes can be a positive way of identifying neglected areas of research or enabling follow on studies for researchers wishing to build a related body of evidence in key areas. They are useful for stimulating research in important but less high profile areas of health need and allow the research community to bring new ideas and topics to the forefront. We hope to see some innovative approaches arise through this mechanism in terms of topics; research teams and methods.

We wish to avoid some of the common problems associated with responsive mode funding such as a high volume of heterogeneous and poorly constructed proposals and a low success rate for researchers – both of which represent a poor use of resources for the research funder and the research community. The Panel will therefore put an emphasis on scientific rigour, quality, fit with criteria and alignment with the mission of the SDO programme. The use of a two stage process with an outline submission will in part help to ensure the coherence and quality of those bids chosen to advance to full proposal stage.

4. Call for proposals: main topic areas identified

For this responsive call, we have identified three main areas in which we are seeking proposals for projects of up to 24 months duration and up to £300,000 in cost:

4.1 Follow-on studies to existing SDO or NIHR HTA research

We are seeking proposals for studies which follow on completed SDO or NIHR HTA work where investigators wish to develop or extend results either singly or by combining with other research teams to build a body of evidence in related areas. These projects could involve further primary and/or secondary research. The additional contribution to knowledge and added value to decision makers in the NHS management and leadership community including the case for continued relevance/ timeliness must be clearly identified. Applicants should note that the project initiating the proposed follow on study must be complete. However, projects shown to be on track for completion in 2010 will also be considered. *This is not a mechanism for funding project*

extensions and evidence of how the new study follows on and provides additional or new benefits must be made explicit.

The focus for the follow-on must relate to the organisation and delivery of health care and the broader objectives of SDO. We need a clear account of the completed research and how the proposed follow-on study adds value. Details of outputs from the earlier study should also be indicated.

4.2 Evidence synthesis

We are seeking proposals for research syntheses, which draw on past primary research within the SDO programme and/or on research funded elsewhere. The broad aim should be to synthesise the existing body of research in relation to a topic or area of importance to the NHS management and leadership community and to provide a summary of research findings and their implications for policy and practice. Proposals could use a variety of review and synthesis methodologies, appropriate to the research topic and the methods used in the primary studies. A clear justification for the chosen topic and methodology is imperative and applicants must demonstrate a proven track record in their chosen methodology. Particular interest will be shown in approaches which have considered techniques for presenting findings in a way most likely to secure implementation of results. We welcome proposals which aim to develop synthesis methods for qualitative as well as quantitative based research.

4.3 Scoping reviews for future research needs

We are seeking proposals for scoping reviews, aimed at identifying and tackling major topic areas of future research need relevant to the SDO programme and its mission. Scoping reviews should include both an overview and synthesis of the relevant literature and an empirical investigation of the views, attitudes and research needs and priorities of stakeholders relevant to the topic area. They should be designed both to inform evidence users in the NHS management and leadership community, and to provide material on which the SDO programme can draw in setting its future commissioning priorities.

5. Criteria and process for proposal selection

The SDO Programme is now seeking outline applications in the areas outlined above. We have provisionally allocated £2 million to this call. Projects may be of up to 24 months duration and up to £300,000 in cost. Applicants should note that we anticipate funding a range of projects in both size and duration. For larger projects, value for money will be an important consideration. Project costs will be carefully scrutinised and must always be well justified though we encourage investigators to include costs associated with project management to ensure completion of the work within the required timeframe. All costs must be as realistic as possible although at outline stage these may be estimates.

The application process will be in two stages. At the first stage, short outline proposals will be reviewed by the SDO Studies Panel, and a number invited to go forward to full proposal. We normally shortlist around two to three times as many projects as can be funded balancing the budget for the call and the typical cost of proposals. No individual feedback can be given on outline proposals which are not short listed though all applicants will receive feedback on the response to the call in general.

Researchers whose proposals are shortlisted will be given the opportunity to develop a full proposal – this is normally about eight weeks; feedback at this stage will be to inform the full proposal in line with the aim of the call. All full proposals will be subject to external peer review, prior to consideration by the SDO Commissioning Board. Decisions on all recommendations for

funding are then made by the Programme Director. All full proposals which are not funded will receive feedback from peer reviewers and the Commissioning Board.

The SDO Studies Panel is predominantly made up of practising managers working in the NHS and service users/lay representatives. It also includes some academics with relevant research expertise. The primary criterion against which the Panel assesses outline proposals is that of **'need for knowledge in the NHS'**. It will use four main criteria to make this judgement:

- Relevance of the proposed research to the main areas or themes set out in this call for proposals.
- Relevance of the proposed research to the needs, interests and current and future challenges for the management community in the NHS.
- Likelihood that the proposed research will produce findings which are useful to and capable of application by the management community in the NHS.
- Likelihood that the proposed research will promote the greater engagement of the academic community of researchers and the practice community of healthcare managers, and the development of links between academic institutions and NHS organisations in this area.

The SDO Commissioning Board is primarily made up of academics with relevant research expertise, but also contains some practising managers. Its main concern is the **quality of the proposed research**. It uses two main criteria to make this judgement:

- Scientific rigour and quality of the proposed research, and the expertise and track record of the research team.
- Value for money of the proposed research, taking into account the overall cost, scale, scope and duration of the work involved

The SDO Commissioning Board will also draw on the assessment of 'NHS importance' made by the SDO Studies Panel.

6. General guidance for applicants

Our main concern is to commission research which is well designed, will be effectively carried out by the research team, and will provide findings which meet the needs of the SDO programme and the NHS management and leadership community it serves. We do not require or expect any particular methodological approach, disciplinary background or expertise, research team structure or other constraints. However, we urge applicants to take into account the following general points:

- **Theoretical framing and empirical methods.** In addressing issues in a way likely to lead to the wide applicability of findings, we encourage applicants to demonstrate the sound theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of their proposals and to show the theoretical and conceptual connections between their proposed research questions and empirical work. Empirical projects may use a wide diversity of methods, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches, carefully matched to study questions and with clear understandings as to how findings from different empirical approaches will be integrated. We welcome ethnographic and/or multi-method based studies.

- **Research team makeup and expertise.** Substantial empirical projects are likely to use teams with significant input from a number of disciplines and a commitment to developing robust inter-disciplinary approaches. Applicants should bear in mind the difficulties of managing large and diffuse project teams across multiple institutions, and show how the work will be managed including the time commitment needed from all team members. The principal applicant (chief investigator) should generally be the person who has contributed most to the intellectual and practical development of the proposal, and who will take responsibility for its implementation. The SDO programme encourages proposals to include an element of research capacity-building.
- **User involvement.** It is a core concern of the SDO programme that all commissioned projects should pay appropriate attention to the needs and experiences of service users, their carers and the public at large. Proposed projects should be explicit in their explanations as to how the proposed work has potential implications for service delivery that could lead to enhanced public and community engagement. Applicants should demonstrate clear involvement of all relevant PPI stakeholders including, local communities, lay people, service users, carers and minority ethnic communities during the design, execution and dissemination of the research.
- **Linkage and exchange.** Given the core mission of the SDO Programme and our focus on knowledge mobilisation, successful projects are likely to involve partnership working between experienced academic teams and those more closely involved in the design and delivery of services.
- **Location of research.** The NIHR Service Delivery and Organisation programme is funded by the NIHR, with contributions from WORD in Wales. Researchers from Scotland or Northern Ireland should contact NETSCC to discuss their eligibility to apply.
- **Research governance.** Applicants should ensure that their proposal complies with the Research Governance Framework. Successful applicants will be required to provide proof of research ethics committee approval for their project, if this is required.
- **Costs and value for money.** We will fund a range of projects in both size and duration. For larger projects, value for money will be an important consideration and project costs will be carefully scrutinised and must always be well justified. NIHR Programmes currently fund Higher Education Institutions (HEI) at a maximum of 80% of Full Economic Cost (except for equipment over £50,000 – 100%). For non-HEI institutions, NIHR may fund 100% of costs. However, the SDO Programme reserves the right to award a grant for less than this maximum and for less than the amount sought by applicants where appropriate.

7. Dissemination and knowledge mobilisation

In outlining their research plans, applicants should make clear how findings will be communicated effectively to a wide variety of academic, policy and service audiences throughout the life of the project. Researchers should bear in mind the two main objectives of the SDO programme (see section 2), and recognise that the SDO programme seeks to fund projects which show a creative and proactive approach to engaging with the NHS management and leadership community.

Researchers will be expected to deliver the following written outputs from any proposed research: an abstract, an executive summary (500 words) and a full report detailing all the work undertaken; supporting technical appendices (up to a maximum of 80,000 words).

Applicants should outline plans for conference, seminar and other forms of dissemination to go alongside written communications. Where appropriate, the proposed work should be designed and delivered in a way that is likely to lead to significant high-quality peer-reviewed publications.

8. Application process and timetable

Any questions, queries or requests for clarification in relation to this call for proposals should be sent by email to sdo@southampton.ac.uk with the reference number and title for the call for proposals as the email header.

The process of commissioning will be in **two stages** and applicants should submit **outline proposals** via the SDO website by 1.00pm on **18 March 2010**. No late proposals will be considered. No paper-based submissions will be considered. Applicants will be notified of the outcome of their outline application approximately three weeks after the SDO Studies panel meeting.

Outline proposals must indicate at the end of section C, Part 2 (background to proposal) whether the same or a substantially similar proposal

- (a) has been previously submitted to and rejected by another funder (and if so, name the funder or funders and dates of submission)**
- (b) is currently under consideration for funding by another funder (and if so, name the funder or funders and dates by which a decision on funding is expected)**
- (c) Please provide details of the earlier project, project number, when completed and evidence of any published output or planned output. For follow on studies, please provide details here of previous research, outcomes of this research and how it informs the new proposed study.**

If the proposal has not been submitted elsewhere for funding then this section of the outline proposal should state “Neither this proposal nor a substantially similar one has already been submitted to another research funder”.

Proposals which do not provide this information will not be considered.

Follow on proposals must provide details of the earlier project, project number, when completed and evidence of any published output or planned output.

Shortlisted applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal and a link to the full application form will be sent to them with the outcome letter. Please note that previous versions of the full applications form will not be accepted. Applicants will be notified of the outcome of their full proposal application approximately three weeks after the SDO commissioning board meeting. Please note these dates may be subject to change.