

Open call

for Research & Innovation Fund – Round 1

January 2021



Deadline for applications: Monday 15 March 2021 at 12 noon. Completed application form, together with two page CVs for each staff member who will work on the project, to be emailed to nicre@newcastle.ac.uk

For all enquiries about the call, please contact nicre@ncl.ac.uk. To register an interest in future updates concerning the call, and to sign up for future news from NICRE, please complete the [online form](#).

Introduction

The National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE), established in September 2020, exists to foster rural enterprise and unlock potential in the UK's rural economies. Its activities focus on:

- a) filling gaps in our current knowledge of rural enterprise and innovation. We achieve this by undertaking and commissioning new research.
- b) developing practical solutions with businesses, rural communities and economic development agencies. This includes new approaches to rural innovation that we can scale up to solve problems and realise new opportunities.
- c) providing evidence to influence better policy and support for rural businesses.

The research work stream of NICRE aims to shift the policy narrative about rural enterprise and unlock innovation potential. It will strengthen the research and evidence base, with four priorities for research evidence:

1. **Productive rural.** We aim to ensure that policy and business support services reflect the needs and ambitions of rural enterprise and innovation potential. Rural businesses can then respond to the need for productivity improvements in the economy.
2. **Smart rural.** We respond to challenges to the ways we live and work through many themes. These include rural mobility, an ageing society, clean growth and big data. Our research helps us to understand their impacts on rural economies. This enables rural businesses to respond and thrive.
3. **Engaged rural.** Many dispersed micro-firms, the self-employed and home-based businesses, make up rural economies. We want them to connect more with university researchers and innovation networks. We research more effective ways of integrating rural businesses into this 'innovation ecosystem'.
4. **Resilient rural.** Rural areas account for 80% of the UK's land area, and in England account for over half a million enterprises, 3.5 million employees and contribute over £250 billion to GDP. Adapting to, and exploiting opportunities

presented by Grand Challenges and macro-economic changes, will affect the future prosperity of rural economies and their communities. This includes the specific challenges and opportunities of rural climate-proofing, decarbonisation, Brexit and Covid-19 adaptation and recovery.

NICRE was established with funding from Research England and its founding Higher Education partners are Newcastle University's Centre for Rural Economy and Business School, the Enterprise Research Centre at Warwick University, and the Countryside and Community Research Institute of the University of Gloucestershire and the Royal Agricultural University.

NICRE seeks to extend participation in its research priorities through an Open Research and Innovation Fund.

Guidance for Applicants

Overview

NICRE's research programme focuses on improving rural business productivity and solving associated grand challenges through:

- a core research excellence programme to remedy weaknesses in the baseline evidence of business activity and potential, and use this to inform strategic and operational action for rural enterprises at national and regional level;
- robust analysis of existing data sources and comprehensive regional survey monitoring of SMEs and micro-businesses.

The Open Research and Innovation Fund seeks to establish a portfolio of research beyond NICRE's founding Universities. We encourage a range of methodological approaches and strands of work that fit with the core Research programme's four cross-cutting themes:

1. **Productive Rural**, responding to the UK's weaker productivity performance, the need to improve performance in all locations and properly integrate rural into economic and industrial plans and strategies and into business and innovation support services.
2. **Smart Rural**, recognising the technological and process developments embedded in the Grand Challenges (Ageing, Mobility, Clean Growth and the Data Economy), which are set to transform the way we live and work, and testing their potential and application in rural economies through coupled socio-technical change.
3. **Engaged Rural**, exploring novel methods and networks for reducing social distance between government, research and innovation institutions and the rural business community. NICRE will showcase and mainstream enhanced methods of engagement with policy, research and innovation partners.

4. **Resilient Rural**, focussing on business aspects of the sustainable use and enhancement of natural capital, and the specific challenges and opportunities of rural climate-proofing, decarbonisation, Brexit and Covid-19 adaptation and recovery.

Projects should take place over a maximum period of up to 6 to 8 months and relate to, at least, one of the four priority areas for NICRE (productive, smart, engaged, resilient rural). While all applications that fit with the four priority areas of NICRE are welcomed, indicative project areas of particular interest include, **but are not limited to**:

- **Next generation technologies** (such as AI, driverless cars, etc.) and rural economies. How will such technological developments affect, have potential for, or require adaptation in rural economies? What new business models are needed to consider the unique problems presented by rural areas?
- **The grand challenges and rural enterprise**. What are the rural enterprise needs and opportunities posed by the Grand Challenges, whether considered individually or in combination? What are the distinctive restrictions or limitations facing solutions in rural communities and places and how are these challenges evolving in the face of economic and social change?
- **The future of retail activities in rural economies**. How can the retail sector in rural areas cope with, and harness opportunities offered by, macro-level factors (e.g. digitalisation, Covid-19 recovery, Brexit etc)? How can the effectiveness of 'eat and buy local' campaigns be improved to benefit rural businesses and communities?
- **Alternative health and care models for ageing and remote communities**. With the Covid-19 pandemic focussing attention on weaknesses across care homes and systems, what challenges and solutions face rural enterprises in this sector?
- **Skills and rural enterprise**. Looking forward, what skills will be required by rural businesses? How can rural enterprises access the skilled staff they need, and how can the upgrading of skills in the rural workforce be best achieved?
- **Rural enterprise and Net Zero**. How will rural businesses and sectors adapt to Net Zero and low carbon business models and where are the prospects for growth and innovation? What are the specific opportunities and constraints facing rural businesses in moving to net zero? How can the sustainable use and enhancement of natural capital be a driver for rural enterprise growth and sustainable development?
- **Urban-rural interdependencies** - In what ways are rural and urban economies interconnected, how are connectivities evolving, and how might synergies between rural and urban enterprise be further nurtured for mutual benefit? What is the contribution of rural enterprise to urban, and regional development, innovation and wellbeing?

Round 1 of the Open Call for the Research & Innovation Fund has £100,000 to distribute to small projects. Each project can seek funding up to a maximum of £15,000. It is expected, therefore, that circa 7 to 8 projects will be supported in total. Each funded project will be required to produce a research paper of publishable quality, including a brief non-technical summary (2-3 pages) of the key findings. The project will also be expected to contribute to NICRE's publication series (short State of the Art Reviews, Policy and Practice Notes, Annual State of the Rural Enterprise Report) and wider dissemination activities.

The timetable for Round 1 of the Open Call is:

Deadline for applications: Monday 15 March 2021 at 12 noon. Completed application form, together with two page CVs for each staff member who will work on the project, to be emailed to nicre@newcastle.ac.uk
Notification of outcome of applications: Monday 29 March 2021.

Eligibility

As NICRE's Open Call for the Research & Knowledge Exchange Fund is funded by Research England, the principal investigator on each project should be based at a Higher Educational Institution (HEI) in England. Costs cannot be claimed for any HEI staff based outside of England. However, match funding contributions from funders in the devolved nations are welcome to encourage learning and knowledge exchange across the UK.

Applicants can be named in more than one application but cannot act as the principal investigator in more than one application.

Postgraduate students are not eligible to apply, however applications from early career researcher are welcomed.

Applications are also welcome which develop links, collaboration or proposal development with NICRE team members (see <https://ncl.ac.uk/nicre/about/people/>) or other staff members at Newcastle, Warwick, Gloucestershire and Royal Agricultural Universities, though this is not a requirement.

Academics outside of the core NICRE team based at Newcastle, Warwick and CCRI are also eligible to apply but should include collaboration with other HEI partners outside of these Universities.

Eligible Costs

NICRE Funding is intended to cover *research and associated knowledge exchange activities*. Potential costs include:

- research staff
- established staff input and associated overheads
- data collection and analysis
- costs for undertaking small scale pilot innovation projects, agenda setting or review activities
- workshops or events to advance the research, engagement or impact associated with the project

As the holder of NICRE funds for the open call, grant offers will be made from Newcastle University. Applications will form the basis for a brief contractual agreement. It is expected that 50% of award will be paid in commencement of the project, with the remainder paid on acceptance of the final report.

All applications should demonstrate that funds are sought for a clearly defined, discrete piece of research, which will have an identifiable output(s).

Evaluation of Applications

All applications will be reviewed against a set of common criteria. Reviewers will score applications according to the five criteria in the table below (on a 1 to 5 scale). Brief comments in support of these scores will be made in the free text section boxes. Both the scores and the free text comments will be used during the selection process.

Criteria description		Score 1-5	Comments	
1	Potential contribution to understanding and improving the performance of rural enterprise in England/UK, fitting with the objectives of NICRE			
2	Research design and methods			
3	Capacity and strength of the research team, external partners and collaborations			
4	Value for money			
5	Anticipated outputs, dissemination and impact plans			
Scale for assessing each criterion				
Poor	Fair/Some weaknesses	Good	Excellent	Outstanding
1	2	3	4	5

Stage 1 – Proposal review

Based on the five criteria in the evaluation form above, Open Call funding proposals will be scored by a minimum of two reviewers.

Stage 2 – Award Panel

Following the initial review of proposals, applications will be considered by an awards panel. The panel will meet virtually, with the final decisions based on reviewing reviewers' ranked scores and comments, while also looking to build a portfolio of projects across the four research priority areas of NICRE (productive, engaged, smart, resilient rural). The panel will consist of an independent chair and academic members drawn from the NICRE team. The non-academic member will provide a stakeholder perspective.

NICRE open call application forms will be treated as strictly confidential and seen for the purpose of review only.