Unlocking Advanced Capabilities in Conservation and Heritage Science: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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Key facts at a glance:

Total fund available	£6.2 million
Award size	Up to £1.5 million FEC • Up to £1.2 million in Capital Funding • Up to £300,000 in Cascaded Funding for Innovation
Funding rate	100% of FEC for eligible capital and capitalisable costs (no indexation)
Opens / closes	7 September 2026 to 25 November 2026, 16:00
Project duration	24 Months
Project start date	1 April 2027
Project end date	31 March 2029
Follow-on staffing	Up to £120,000 per year (80% FEC) from 1 April 2029 for up to 24 months, subject to a gateway review
Apply through	UKRI Funding Service
Contact	riches@ahrc.ukri.org (call queries); support@funding-service.ukri.org (system queries)

Scope and what the call funds

Q1. What is "Tranche 2"?
Tranche 2 is "Unlocking Advanced Capabilities in Conservation and Heritage Science" Call. It is the second investment phase of the RICHeS Programme, building on the infrastructure establishment of Tranche 1 to target capability enhancement.

Q2. Can the call fund a brand-new facility?
No. The call is designed to augment and advance existing facilities, expanding access to them and enhancing their analytical capability, rather than creating a new facility from scratch.

Q3. What if my organisation is not yet a recognised national significant facility, or I want to take an existing facility in a completely different direction?
The call is designed to augment and advance existing facilities rather than create one from scratch (see Q2). Adding a substantial new capability to an existing facility can be in scope where it expands analytical capability and access. In both cases, set out the existing capability you are building on, your track record of access, and why the facility is nationally significant.

Q4. Does the call fund research programmes?
No. The call funds infrastructure and capability only, not research programmes.

Q5 Can the call be used to make more collections accessible?
Not directly. This call is about enhancing infrastructure, specifically the laboratories and facilities that provide conservation and heritage science capability. It is not a route to funding work that opens up collections themselves, such as digitisation, which is only supported where it is essential to developing or testing the capability (see Q36). The focus is on how the proposed investment improves the capability, capacity, performance or accessibility of the facility for users (see Q29).

Q6. Is research for innovation in facilities allowed?
The call does not fund standalone research programmes. However, research activities that are necessary to develop, test or demonstrate new infrastructure capabilities, technologies, methods or approaches are within scope (see Q29 and Q31).

Q7. Can I apply for a research grant (e.g. an AHRC Large Grant) and also for the infrastructure under this call?
Yes. Because this call funds infrastructure and capability rather than research programmes, the two would be considered complementary rather than duplicate, provided that:

- the costs, objectives and activities are clearly separated between the two applications and;
- the same equipment or infrastructure is not requested in both.

Q8. Is bioarchaeology in scope?
Yes. Bioarchaeology and genomics are areas of interest in consortium applications. The other areas of particular interest are innovation and spill-over into environmental sustainability, health or risk management of heritage assets, and embedding AI and computational methods.

Q9. What types of sites and assets are of most interest, and who are the intended beneficiaries?
The funding opportunity does not prioritise particular types of site or asset (for example archaeological sites versus museums). It asks for proposals that expand access to nationally significant facilities, address clearly evidenced unmet demand and complement the existing RICHeS network. Beneficiaries should extend beyond the host institution to the wider heritage sector, other scientific disciplines, industry, policymakers and the public. Visitors and the public can feature as part of the wider benefits and pathways to impact, but the call funds infrastructure and

capability rather than visitor experience, so the case should show how the capability will be accessed and used.

Q10. Should equipment be off-the-shelf, or is there scope for innovation?
Both are possible. Eligible costs include the acquisition, delivery and installation of equipment, and the call also looks for innovation. The funding opportunity refers to enabling AI or technical innovations, and to bespoke alterations or automations. Innovation, including the development, adaptation or novel application of techniques, is also an assessment area. The cascaded funding for innovation component (up to £300,000) is the route for developing, testing or demonstrating new technologies with industry partners. All spend must be capital or capitalisable.

Q11. Would integrated, service-based capabilities be considered infrastructure?
Potentially. The guidance refers to "facilities and capability platforms", and eligible costs include specialist IT equipment, software and other essential digital infrastructure. A service-based capability fits where the spend is capital or capitalisable and creates a lasting enhancement to capability or access. The costs of running a service on an ongoing basis are not eligible (see Q33).

Q12. Would a consortium that joins together several established facilities with a heritage science focus be in scope?
Consortia are encouraged in projects that bring together the expertise needed to achieve their objectives. However, the call funds capital investment, and the call is looking for new or enhanced capabilities that strengthen and extend the RICHeS network. A proposal should therefore show what new or enhanced capability the consortium will create, not only that existing facilities will be linked.

Fit with the RICHeS distributed network and avoiding duplication

Q13. How do I show my proposal does not duplicate existing capability?
The funding opportunity asks that proposals enhance, benefit and complement the existing RICHeS distributed infrastructure network, avoiding duplication of existing capability, facilities or established techniques. Applicants are advised to review the HSDS Catalogue of services to identify existing capability and to confirm that their proposed infrastructure adds to, rather than duplicates current provision.

Q14 What is the Heritage Science Data Service (HSDS), and how does it relate to this call?
The HSDS is the RICHeS programme's digital infrastructure, funded by RICHeS. It holds the Catalogue of Services, which applicants should use to identify existing capability, check that their proposal adds to rather than duplicates current provision (see Q13), and find relevant contacts (see Q41). If your application is successful, you will also be expected to work with the HSDS to ensure FAIR access to, and deposition of, data (see Q55).

Q15. Can RICHeS tell me how my idea compares with others, or which option would be more competitive?
No. RICHeS cannot assess or comment on the relative merits of proposed concepts, or advise on which option is better aligned or more competitive. All proposals go through the formal assessment process.

Q16. Can this funding be used to support or sustain an existing Tranche 1 facility?
No. Funding from this call cannot be used to support or sustain an existing Tranche 1 investment. Proposals should enhance and complement the existing infrastructure.

Eligibility and who can be named

Q17. Can organisations that received Tranche 1 funding apply to this call?
Yes. Organisations that received Tranche 1 funding remain eligible to apply, provided they meet the eligibility requirements and the objectives of this call.

Q18. Will small facilities be disadvantaged compared with organisations that already have substantial infrastructure?
No. Applications are not assessed according to the amount or size of their existing infrastructure offer, but how the proposal can meet the objectives of the call. Applicants should focus on demonstrating:

- national significance and relevance;
- clear unmet demand;
- proposal feasibility;
- sustainable capability building;
- benefits to the wider heritage science community; and
- improved access to facilities and expertise.

A smaller facility with a strong national case and clear evidence of sector impact can be as competitive as a larger institution.

Q19. If a previous application was unsuccessful, can I submit a related proposal?
Potentially. However, UKRI operates a no-resubmission policy. Any new application must be substantially different from a previous submission, whether to this programme or another UKRI funding opportunity. Applicants should refer to the AHRC Research Funding Guide, particularly the section on resubmissions, before preparing a further application.

Q20. Which institution do I apply through if I am about to move jobs?
Applications must be submitted through the organisation employing the project lead at the point of submission. If you will not yet have taken up a new post by the deadline, you would need to apply through your current institution. If you move after submission but before an award is made, or during the life of a grant, refer to the AHRC guidance on requesting a change to your project, including a change of host institution.

Q21. Can a RICHeS Tranche 1 award holder be a Co-Lead on a Tranche 2 application?
Yes.

Q22. Can a member of a Tranche 1 award holder team be named as a project partner, including at the same institution?
Yes. They can be formally identified as a project partner even where both activities are based within the same institution, but should not also be listed as project staff. Note that the guidance defines a project partner as a collaborating organisation.

Q23. Can someone who has moved from a RICHeS-funded role into a new academic post be named on an application?
Yes, they may be named in that new capacity.

Q24. Can international partners be included?
Yes. International partners can be included as project partners. They are treated in the same way as UK-based project partners, and a letter of support from each project partner is required.

Q25. Are different types of institution treated differently?
No. The opportunity follows standard UKRI eligibility rules and does not favour any particular type of organisation. Applications will be assessed on how well they meet the objectives of the funding opportunity rather than the type or size of institution involved. The panel will look for a balanced

portfolio across geographical regions, disciplines and capability areas, and the amount of existing infrastructure is not assessed (see Q17).

Q26. Is there a limit on the number of applications an organisation can submit, or on how many projects it can be involved in?
Demand management is not being applied to this call, and the guidance sets no limit on the number of applications per organisation or on involvement as a partner or co-lead. Two discrete proposals serving different functions, with different project leads, are therefore permissible, provided each application is self-contained and the same equipment or costs are not requested in both.

Capital investment and what can be funded

Q27. Which staffing costs can be capitalised, and what about investigator effort?
Refer to the guidance on the capitalisation of funding, which sets out which staff costs are and are not eligible.

Q28. Can investigator time or a research technical professional be costed?
The guidance lists “staff costs directly associated to equipment installation, commissioning and implementation” as eligible, and asks applicants to justify capitalisable staff costs in the Resources and cost justification section. Costs must be capital or capitalisable, so time spent on routine management or operation is not eligible.

Q29. What can capital investment funding be spent on?
Funding must support capital or capitalisable investment that creates a lasting enhancement to facility capability, capacity, performance or accessibility. Examples could include:

- new or upgraded equipment;
- digital infrastructure;
- software development;
- workflow and data management improvements; and
- technical developments that improve facility capability or user access.

Q30. How can collaborative activities with industry partners be “capitalisable”?
The guidance lists capitalisable collaborative activities with industry partners (including SMEs) to develop, test or demonstrate new technologies, products or services as eligible, and says the cascaded funding must relate directly to capitalisable activity that enhances your infrastructure, such as technically, via efficiencies, bespoke alterations or automations. In practice, collaboration is capitalisable where it produces a lasting enhancement to the facility itself. Illustrative examples are a company developing bespoke automation or software that is integrated into an instrument, a bespoke modification of equipment, or a new workflow or data pipeline built into the facility. Events, networking and routine services are not capitalisable. For these purposes industry partners exclude higher education institutions, independent research organisations and charitable organisations.

Q31. Can software or workflow development be supported through the cascaded funding element?
Yes, provided the activity clearly enhances the facility’s capability and meets the capitalisation requirements. For example, software that improves performance, efficiency, functionality or capacity may be eligible.

Q32. Are there limits on how the £1.2 million and the £300,000 can be spent, and is there a preferred ratio between capital and capitalisable staff costs?
All requested funding must be capital or capitalisable expenditure (see Q29 and Q33). The guidance does not set a preferred ratio between capital and capitalisable staff costs. Instead, the more costly resources, in particular capitalisable staff costs, must be justified as appropriate, proportionate and good value for money. For the £300,000 cascaded element:

- the activity must be capitalisable and directly related to enhancing your infrastructure;
- the funding must be allocated within the first year of the project, and no later than 1 April 2028;
- you must show how you will carry out due diligence and meet Subsidy Control Act 2022 requirements before awarding any funds; and
- named project partners and consortium partners are not eligible to receive it (see Q47).

Q33. What types of activities are not supported?
The fund supports capital investment rather than operational costs. Activities focused solely on running or maintaining existing services are unlikely to be eligible. For example:

- installing and configuring equipment may be eligible;
- developing technical systems to support infrastructure may be eligible;
- employing staff to operate facilities on an ongoing basis would not be eligible.
- Events, training and staff research time are not capitalisable costs.

Q34. Can funding be used to recruit staff to make existing facilities more accessible?
No. The call supports capitalisable staff costs connected to installing, configuring or developing infrastructure. It does not support operational staffing, such as hiring technicians to run facilities or provide ongoing access.

Q35. Can fixed-term staff, for example in a knowledge transfer associate-style role, be included to develop innovation?
Only to the extent that the staff costs are capitalisable and directly associated with installing, commissioning, implementing or developing the infrastructure. Operational staffing is not eligible (see Q34), and the call does not fund studentships or postdoctoral research associates.

Q36. Would digitisation costs be eligible where digitised material is needed, for example, to train or test AI?
Collection digitisation is not funded, except where it is essential to developing or testing the capability. Where digitised material is needed to train or test an AI or computational tool, explain why it is essential and limit the request to what the development and testing require, rather than wider digitisation of collections.

Q37. What does it mean that extensive training is not in scope? How should applicants ensure SMEs can benefit if they lack specialist digital skills?
External training programmes, including training for SMEs, are not funded through this opportunity. Applicants should instead explain how users will be able to access and benefit from the capability through documentation, support mechanisms, access routes and follow-on staffing arrangements.

Q38. Could the cascaded funding be used to gain insights from end users (for example member heritage organisations) to improve user experience and promotion?
Probably not in that form. Cascaded funding goes to industry partners for capitalisable activity that enhances your infrastructure, and charities are not eligible to receive it. User research and promotion are not in themselves capitalisable. A business could potentially be funded to develop something capitalisable that improves access, such as a user-facing platform or interface built into the capability. User engagement more generally should be addressed in your Approach section.

Demonstrating need

Q39. What evidence should be provided to demonstrate unmet user demand and future national need?
Applicants should provide evidence of both current unmet demand and the national significance of the proposed investment. Examples of useful evidence include:

- Demonstrable sustained user demand that exceeds current capacity (e.g. through data from annual reviews, user needs surveys);

- records of projects, researchers or organisations that could not be accommodated;
- facility access statistics and waiting lists;
- national or sector-level needs analyses;
- case studies illustrating current capability gaps;
- data demonstrating demand from the wider heritage science community.

Assessment panels can only consider information included within the application itself, so summarise key evidence directly in your proposal rather than relying on external links.

Consortia, leadership and matchmaking

Q40. Who should lead a consortium, and how should governance work?
This is for applicants to decide, based on what best reflects the structure and balance of the proposed project. Governance plans, including roles, responsibilities and decision-making, should be included in the Approach section. If successful, you will be expected to establish a consortium agreement covering governance, roles and responsibilities, and management of shared resources. RICHeS cannot advise whether a group should lead, join or prioritise particular consortia.

Q41. How can I find collaborators or other groups developing related ideas?
RICHeS can help facilitate appropriate connections between organisations with complementary interests. With your agreement, contact details may be shared with prospective applicants where there is a clear match in expertise or capability needs. You can also use the HSDS Catalogue of services to identify relevant contacts and existing capability.

Q42. Is there a minimum number of partners required for a consortium?
The guidance sets no minimum. It asks for collaboration across “a coherent group of relevant partners”, including connections with SMEs, and the panel favours meaningful collaboration with SMEs and other partners, or delivery through a consortium that brings together the expertise needed. Formal collaboration agreements are required if an award is made.

Industry partners and cascaded (innovation) funding

Q43. Is an industry partner required for every application?
The industry partner requirement applies only to the cascaded funding component of the call, not to the call as a whole. Check the guidance on project partners to see how it applies to each component of your proposal. Industry engagement is assessed in the application. The call looks for connections with SMEs to increase knowledge exchange, the Approach question asks how you will engage industry partners, and the panel favours meaningful collaboration with SMEs and other industry partners.

Q44. Are start-up companies eligible for cascaded funding?
Start-ups are not ineligible under the call, so a recently incorporated company with limited trading history would not be excluded from due diligence on that basis alone.

Q45. Can charities receive cascaded funding?
No. The cascaded funding for innovation element is intended to support UKRI’s objective of driving economic growth through business innovation and development, so it is focused on businesses and SMEs rather than charities. The intention is to stimulate technology development, commercialisation and knowledge exchange, creating longer-term economic and innovation benefits beyond the lifetime of the project.

Q46. Is it correct that charities cannot receive funding?
The restriction applies to the cascaded funding for innovation element, not to the call as a whole. For these purposes industry partners exclude higher education institutions, independent research

organisations and charitable organisations. Charities can be named as project partners (the guidance includes third-sector organisations), and the lead must be an organisation eligible for AHRC funding.

Q47. Do I need to name the company that will receive cascaded funding?
No. The recipient is selected after the award is made through the host organisation's own procurement process. Your application should describe the process and criteria you will apply, rather than naming a specific firm or firms. Remember to consult UKRI's definitions and regulations around project partners as named partners cannot receive cascaded funding, so naming a firm as a partner would also rule it out.

Q48. How do I list an SME in the application, and should the SME be a co-lead?
If the SME is to be funded through the cascaded funding for innovation element, it cannot be listed as a project co-lead or as a project partner. Named project partners and consortium partners are not eligible for cascaded funding, and the recipient is selected after the award is made through your organisation's own procurement process, so it is not named in the application (see Q47). Describe the process and criteria you will use to select it instead.

If the SME will not receive cascaded funding for innovation but has an integral role in the project, whether through cash or in-kind contributions, it can be listed as a project partner, with a letter of support.

Q49. Do industry partners need to be UK-based, and can the company receiving cascaded funding be based anywhere?
Project partners, including industry partners, can be in the UK or overseas, and a mix of UK and international partners is possible (see Q24). The company receiving cascading funding for innovation must pass due diligence and meet Subsidy Control Act 2022 requirements (see Q50).

Q50. Where are the subsidy control due diligence criteria?
They are on the UKRI Funding rules page, in the subsidy control section further down, which links to the relevant government guidance.

Q51. Why are SMEs a key part of this call?
Industry engagement is a central objective of the call, which seeks projects that expand collaboration with industry in order to:

- accelerate technology development;
- encourage commercialisation of innovations;
- promote knowledge exchange; and
- support business growth and innovation.

Facilities also benefit from access to specialist expertise and innovative solutions from industry partners.

Q52. What benefits are SMEs expected to gain from participating?
The programme aims to create opportunities for businesses to:

- develop innovative products, services or technologies;
- strengthen their research and development profile;
- build case studies and demonstrable track records;
- develop new commercial opportunities;
- access specialist heritage science expertise; and
- generate future business growth and investment opportunities.

Assessment

Q53. Will the geographical spread of consortia be considered?

Yes, at portfolio level. The panel will seek a balance across geographical regions, heritage science disciplines and technological capability areas, and portfolio fit is an assessment area. Geographical spread is not scored in itself, so applications should focus on the case for the capability, the demand for it and the strength of the collaboration.

Q54. Who will be on the assessment panel?
Applications will be assessed by a panel that reviews and ranks fundable applications in order of priority and AHRC makes the final funding decisions. The panel is drawn from the AHRC Peer Review college, with reference to other UKRI Peer Review College members and/or coopted external members as appropriate.

Obligations of award holders

Q55. What will successful award holders be expected to do?

- Provide access for conservation and heritage science users, and take part in the RICHeS Access Fund process (supporting user queries and applications, assessing feasibility, and completing agreed work on time).
- Work with the Heritage Science Data Service (HSDS) to ensure FAIR access to, and deposition of, data.
- Enable access through other routes too, such as collaborative research, consultancy or commercial activity, or in-kind contributions.
- Report regularly to RICHeS IHQ, contribute to quarterly project-level reporting to the RICHeS Programme Board and AHRC, and engage with the external programme evaluation.

Future funding

Q56. Will there be a Tranche 3 funding round?
No plans currently exist for a Tranche 3 funding opportunity. Organisations seeking future infrastructure funding should monitor the UKRI Funding Finder and other relevant funders for new opportunities.

Q57. How does the follow-on staffing work? Is a separate application needed?
The follow-on staffing is issued as a separate award to holders of a grant under this call, subject to a successful assurance gateway health check by AHRC six months before the project ends. It runs from 1 April 2029 for up to 24 months, at £120,000 a year (80% FEC, £96,000), covering salary, employer on-costs, and estates and overheads.

Q58. Where would follow-on staff be based in a geographically spread consortium, and can it be more than one person?
The guidance describes a role that enables ongoing access, user engagement and the effective operation and sustainability of the capability for external users, and asks you to explain in the Approach section how follow-on staffing will contribute to this.

Getting more help

Q59. Can I discuss my proposal individually with the RICHeS team before submitting?
Individual discussions with prospective applicants ahead of submission are not offered.

Q60. Where can I find more information about the AHRC Impact Toolkit?
The AHRC Impact Toolkit is now available.

Q61. Where can I find eligibility, scope and application process details?

In the full call guidance: Unlocking advanced capabilities in conservation and heritage science, UKRI.

Q62. Who do I contact for help?
For costings and writing your application, contact your research office first. For questions about this call, email riches@ahrc.ukri.org. For Funding Service or submission queries, email support@funding-service.ukri.org