DICE Network+ Flexible Fund Call

Feasibility Studies

V3 Feb 2026

DICE Network+

The Digital Innovation and Circular Economy (DICE) Network+ will realise a transformative shift in the sustainability and circularity of digital and communication technologies.

Leveraging the power of the digital revolution, the network will drive a circular economy across sectors and value chains. By adopting a network of networks approach, harnessing interdisciplinary collaboration, research, and technological innovation, our network will be a beacon for change, inspiring and guiding industries, governments, and communities towards a digitally enabled sustainable and circular economy. See website for more detail.

Engaging teams from the Universities of Exeter, Sheffield, Salford, Swansea, Southampton, Surrey, Nottingham, Queens University Belfast, and the Open University, the project will run from January 2025 to December 2027. In addition, the Network+ is launched with a wide reach of **industry partners** (including Ellen MacArthur Foundation, AMRC, Digital Catapult, British Computer Society, SAP, BASF, Wabtec, eBay, BSI), **leading UKRI-funded projects** (including Faraday Institution, Royce Institute, NICER Programme, Pro2 and Connected Everything Networks) and **government partners** (DESNZ, Defra, DSIT).

Funding Opportunities:

One of the key opportunities within the DICE Network+ is flexible funding to accelerate wider research into specific challenge areas at the interfaces of digital technologies and circular economy. This funding consists of £450,000 at 80% full Economic Cost (FEC) as detailed below.

This call covers the Knowledge Exchange Placements and first round of the Feasibility Studies.

Fund	Total funding available (80% fEC)	Maximum funding per project (80% fEC)	Projects funded to date	Funds available	Remaining number of projects to fund	Application schedule
Knowledge Exchange Placements	£50,000	£5,000	6	£23,200	6	Round C application deadline 9 March 2026
Feasibility Studies	£300,000	£50,000	3	£151,525	3	Round B application deadline 27 April 2026
Demonstrator Studies	£100,000	£50,000	0	£100,000	2	Application deadline 27 April 2026

Feasibility Study Funding:

The total funding available for this Feasibility Study call is £151,525. Feasibility Studies will be awarded

- at 80% full Economic Cost (fEC).
- to a maximum award value of **£50,000 per project.**
- with total project value not exceeding £62,500.

Approach:

The DICE Network+ has an ambitious approach with a desire to create impact and meaningful change within the sector. This Feasibility Study Call provides the opportunity to undertake speculative and potentially high-impact research to accelerate innovative solutions that promote the adoption of a digitally enabled circular economy.

Areas of focus:

We are seeking studies that are innovative, evidence based, applied and appreciate the need for a whole system approach. The feasibility study should result in increased confidence in the proof of concept developed, which then has potential to attract further prioritisation and investment in the area. Applications should include or be led by an early career academic and should involve at least one industrial or government partner to ensure real world application and impact.

The DICE Network+ is simultaneously addressing two interrelated challenge areas with applications welcomed that align with these:

> **Embed:** Embedding sustainability and circularity within the design of digital and communication technologies.
>
> **Enable:** Realising the potential of digital revolution, including advances in digital technologies and processes, to enable a circular economy.

We have identified specific areas of research focus which are detailed below, along with example projects (noting these are not exhaustive):

1. Data Centres: Material intensity & e-waste

- Developing circular design strategies for data-centre hardware to reduce material intensity, focusing on modular server components and recoverable architectures.
- Exploring digital tracking systems to monitor material flows and end-of-life pathways for data-centre equipment, improving recovery of critical raw materials (CRMs).
- Assessing opportunities for refurbishment, remanufacture and secondary-market deployment of retiring data-centre assets.

- Exploring AI-enabled optimisation of hardware utilisation to extend component lifetimes and delay e-waste generation.

2. Space: Extending use & end-of-life recovery of critical raw materials

- Exploring circular approaches to satellite component manufacturing that enable extended operational life and improved recovery of CRMs.
- Investigating digital tools for tracking material use across satellite constellations to support in-orbit servicing, repair, and reuse.
- Studying feasibility of modular spacecraft components that simplify disassembly and materials recovery post-mission.

3. Semi-conductors: Component manufacturing & substitution

- Developing digital twins for semiconductor production lines to identify waste hotspots, yield-loss drivers, and circularity interventions.
- Investigating the feasibility of reclaiming and reprocessing materials from end-of-life chips to feed back into UK supply chains.
- Studying opportunities to integrate traceability systems that track semiconductor materials from fabrication through to end-of-life recovery.

4. Telecoms: Consumer device takeback & end-of-life materials (e.g., fibre-optic cable)

- Creating digital tools or platforms that increase consumer participation in telecoms device takeback schemes, improving return rates and material recovery.
- Evaluating circular pathways for end-of-life fibre-optic cables, including improved mapping of buried infrastructure and recovery feasibility studies.
- Prototyping diagnostic or authentication technologies that support refurbishment and reuse of telecoms hardware.
- Investigating socio-technical barriers to adoption of circular telecoms systems, including user behaviours, incentives, and industry readiness.

5. Renewables: Extending use & end-of-life recovery of critical raw materials

- Designing digital identification and tracking systems to follow CRM-intensive renewable-energy components (e.g., wind turbines, solar modules) across their lifecycle.
- Investigating UK-feasible processes for recovery, separation, and reuse of CRMs from decommissioned renewable-energy infrastructure.
- Assessing digital tools that model end-of-life scenarios and optimise circular intervention points for renewable-energy technologies.

Application of funds:

The sum awarded can include both directly incurred and directly allocated costs, covering investigator/ researcher time, travel and subsistence appropriate to delivery of the project, and consumables.

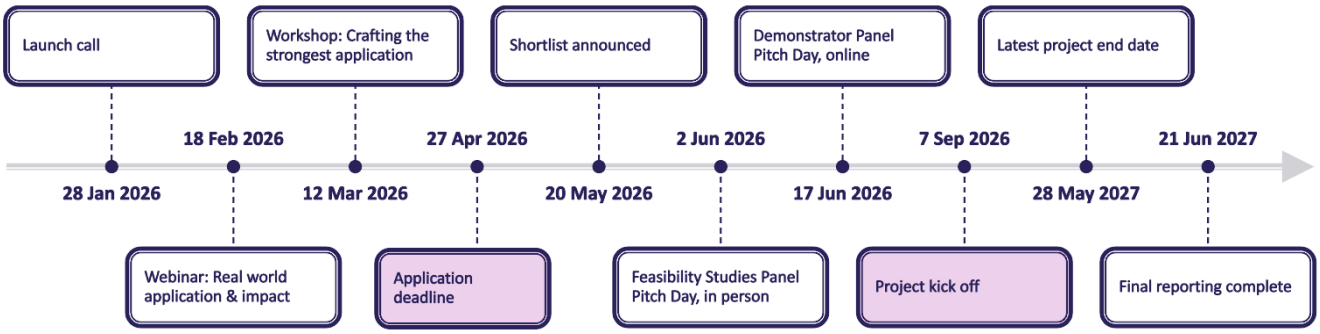
The duration of each individual project can be between 6 and 9 months from the date of award. It is expected that all projects funded in this call will be completed by 28 May 2027 and be fully invoiced by 21 June 2027. No extensions beyond this date will be possible.

As the grant holder, the University of Exeter is responsible for allocating funding to successful proposals and will reimburse the lead institution at 80% fEC. The lead institution must be willing to provide the remaining 20% fEC. Applications where a portion of the project costs are met by industry funding are also welcomed. Lead institutions will be required to itemise bills based on 100% fEC and then invoice at 80% fEC.

The lead institution will be accountable for the conduct of the research, the use of public funds and for ensuring the proper financial management of grants in accordance with UKRI terms.

Key dates:

The timeline and table below show the key dates.



Date	Action
28-Jan-26	Call goes live: Public Announcement & webinar
18-Feb-26	Webinar: Real world application & impact
12-Mar-26	Workshop: Crafting the strongest application
27-Apr-26	**Midday, Deadline for submissions**
20-May-26	Shortlist notification & invitations to Panel Pitch Day
03-Jun-26	**Feasibility Studies:** Panel Pitch Day - in person
09-Jun-26	Feasibility Studies: Applicants notified of funding decision
17-Jun-26	**Demonstrators:** Panel Pitch Day - online
24-Jun-26	Demonstrators: Applicants notified of funding decision
31-Aug-26	Completion of contracting process
01-Sep-26	Project start & kick off meeting
07-Sep-26	Launch webinar event (date TBC)
28-May-27	Project completion (last date)
21-Jun-27	Last date for submission of final reporting & invoicing

Application process:

The deadline for submissions is **Midday 27 April 2026**. Applications received after this deadline will not be accepted.

The application process will consist of two stages. Awards will be made via a short, written application of two parts, followed by a pitch to a multidisciplinary panel including representatives from industry and UKRI.

Feasibility study applications should be submitted using the application form provided, via email to Georgie Hopkins at DICE-network@exeter.ac.uk by midday on Monday 27 April 2026. The application form is accessible on the DICE Network+ website when the call goes live on Wednesday 28 January 2026. Every application will receive an email reply to confirm receipt.

Eligibility criteria:

- Funding is available to higher education institutions, research council institutes and independent research organisations in the UK that are normally eligible for UKRI funding. Full guidelines can be found here.
- We welcome applications from investigators who work on a part-time basis.
- We are keen to support applications from early career researchers.
- We encourage collaboration across organisations where it will be beneficial to the delivery of a project; where two or more organisations are participating, a single application should be

submitted via the Principal Investigator's institution, and they will be responsible for the disbursement of funds to third parties.

- Subcontracting is allowed, although we would not expect to fund proposals where more than 40% of the award is subcontracted.
- Standard UKRI eligibility rules apply.
- Post-Doctoral Research Associates who are involved in developing an application and who are to be engaged in the research can be named as a 'Researcher Co-Investigator' in applications.
- Individuals may submit or be named on more than one application.
- The application must include at least one project partner from either industry, charity or policy. Strong evidence of partner engagement and commitment to co-creation is required.
- Matched funding and collaboration with industry, policy and third sector organisations or other programmes is permitted. Partnership be it financial or in-kind with industry is encouraged. Project Partners will not receive funding directly from the award but will play a role in the proposed research. They will be separate institutions to those submitting the proposal. Named Project Partners must be UK based. An organisation should only be named as a Project Partner if it is providing specific contributions (either in cash or kind) to the project. Any partners should be from an organisation with a research and/or innovation base. There is no limit to the number of Project Partners. A letter of support should be supplied from all project partners confirming:
    - The organisation's role in and commitment to the proposed project and explain how it will contribute to the impact of the project.
    - The value of any cash in-kind contributions.
- Any financial or other interests with any project partners named in the application must be disclosed to ensure integrity of research.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion:

The DICE Network+ understands that excellence will be achieved through recognising the value of every individual. We want to encourage, support and respect ideas from everyone and ensure our inclusive activities are representative of the diverse circular economy community. Our ambition is to instil these values across all our activities, and we wish to support a diverse cohort of participants. As such, we welcome applications from diverse and underrepresented groups and encourage applicants to discuss any specific requirements that will enable participation - please contact the DICE Network+ Manager, Georgie Hopkins, by email DICE_Network@exeter.ac.uk.

The principles of EDI will be adhered to across the Fund, specific measures include:

- Assessment panel composition will be considered with the aim of maintaining EDI.
- All assessment panel members are encouraged to have undertaken equality and diversity training prior to appointment.
- The application process has been designed to minimise any potential impact of bias in decision making:
    - The short, written application form consists of two parts allowing the project idea to be reviewed separately to identifying information.

    - The application review process follows a two-stage process against pre-defined criteria.
- Applicants will be invited to complete a voluntary EDI questionnaire. This confidential information will enable DICE Network+ to review funding activities for diversity amongst protected characteristics (as identified in the Equality Act 2010)

Responsible Innovation:

Responsible Innovation is a process that takes the wider impacts of research and innovation into account. It aims to ensure that unintended negative impacts are avoided, that barriers to dissemination, adoption and diffusion of research and innovation are reduced, and that the positive societal and economic benefits of research and innovation are fully realised. The DICE Network+ wants to ensure that any research it funds is undertaken with the values of Responsible Innovation in mind. In this case, we expect researchers involved in funded feasibility studies to anticipate, reflect and engage on the wider ethical and societal impacts, implications and value of their work, entering into dialogue with the public and other stakeholders where appropriate, and respecting the views of others.

Evaluation process

The evaluation process will follow the proposed best practice for promoting EDI in research and funding as presented in this reflective paper.

Applications will be assessed by a panel made up of delegates from the DICE Network+ Academic Team, Advisory Group and wider DICE N+ partners following the process detailed below (and Figure 1).

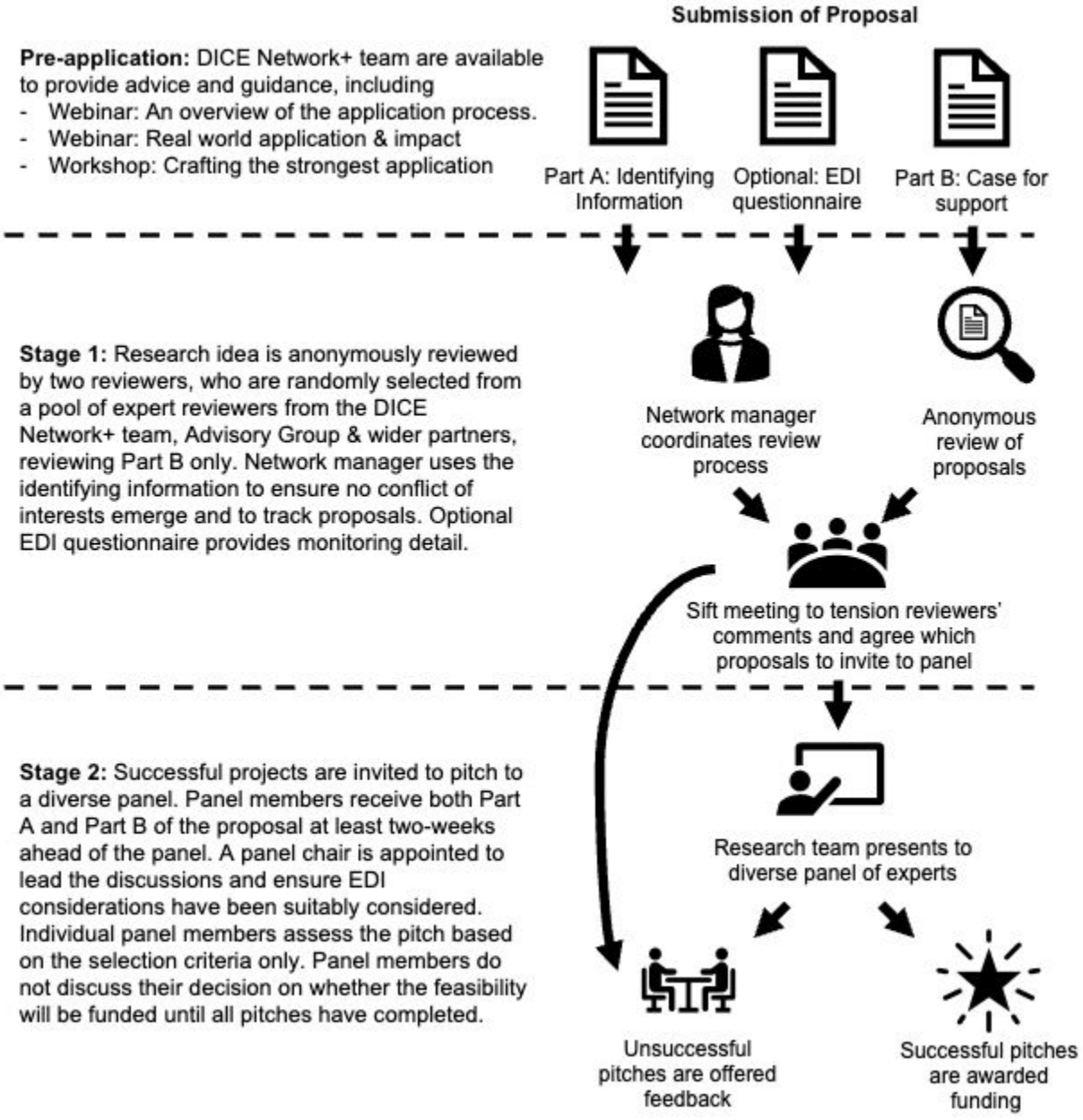
Stage 1: An initial screening will be undertaken by the DICE Network+ Manager to check:

- Applications meet the essential criteria and eligibility requirements.
- Applicants have submitted all the required materials.
- Any declared conflicts of interest prior to circulation to the assessors and to consider any additional potential conflicts of interest before allocation of proposals to assessors.

Research idea is anonymously reviewed by two reviewers, who are randomly selected from a pool of expert reviewers from the DICE Network+ Academic Team, Advisory Group and wider DICE N+ partners. Network manager uses the identifying information to ensure no conflict of interests emerge and to track proposals. Optional EDI questionnaire provides monitoring detail.

Stage 2: Successful projects are invited to pitch to a diverse panel. Panel members receive both Part A and Part B of the proposal at least two-weeks ahead of the panel. A panel chair is appointed to lead the discussions and ensure EDI considerations have been suitably considered. Individual panel members assess the pitch based on the selection criteria only. Panel members do not discuss their decision on whether the feasibility will be funded until all pitches have completed.

Figure 1: the Evaluation Process



Further information

If you require any further information or have any questions regarding this funding call, please contact the DICE Network+ Manager, Georgie Hopkins, by email DICE_Network@exeter.ac.uk