

Procedures for the Joint Transnational Calls 2026, within the framework of the European Partnership for Brain Health, on

Biological, social and environmental factors that impact the trajectory of brain health across the lifespan

This working document is a mutual statement of intention among all participating funding organisations the Joint Transnational Call who agree to make every reasonable effort to fulfil the intents expressed in the Joint Transnational Call as well as its implementation as described below.

The call procedures excluding the confidential parts (marked in grey) will be published on the call website to guarantee transparency for the applying researchers.

1. Call Steering Committee (CSC)

The Call Steering Committee (CSC) is a subset of the EP BrainHealth Governing Board (GB), comprising the EP BrainHealth funding organisations, who participate in the Joint Transnational Call. Funding organisations that are not EP BrainHealth partners but participate in the Joint Transnational Call (Third country funders or ad-hoc funders) are also members of the CSC.

The CSC will decide on the text of the Joint Transnational Call and the composition of the Peer Review Panel (PRP) including patient and ethics experts. Based on the recommendations of the review panel, the CSC will decide on the proposals to be funded. Each participating funding organisation will make the final funding decision according to their respective regulations and availability of funds.

2. Eligible funding recipients

Joint eligibility criteria are specified in the call text, see call text section 6.

The decision on these criteria has been made by the Call Steering Committee. The Joint Call Secretariat will check applications comply with the joint formal eligibility criteria.

In addition, specific eligibility criteria might apply for each funding organisation. Checking applications against those specific criteria is the individual matter of the respective funding organisation. Each funding organisation will provide a funder-specific information sheet (national Annexe) to be published together with the call text. The funder-specific information sheet shall inform of specific eligibility criteria that will be applied by the respective funding organisation. In addition, each funding organisation will provide contact details to be published as part of the call text in order to individually advise applicants on all specific questions and criteria.

3. Application

See call text section 7.

4. Evaluation

4.1. Pre-proposal evaluation

The review process will be in two stages.

4.1.1. Formal criteria check of pre-proposals

The Joint Call Secretariat (JCS) will check the pre-proposals to ensure that they meet the call's joint formal criteria (e.g., date of submission; number of participating partners and countries/regions; inclusion of all necessary information according to the respective templates, written in English). In

parallel, the JCS will provide online access to the proposals to the national/regional funding organisations participating in the call, which will perform a funder's specific eligibility check for compliance with their respective regulations.

Inclusion of partners not adhering to the specific regulations of their respective funding organisation may result in the rejection of the entire proposal without further review. Applicants are thus strongly advised to contact their respective funding organisation to enquire about their eligibility before submitting an application.

Compliance with the scope / topic of the call will be verified by the scientific reviewers during the pre-proposal review (see section 4.1.2.d).

The JCS and national/regional funding organisations may perform cross-checks in parallel submissions to other joint transnational calls and national calls. Double funding is not allowed. Applicants will be required to disclose parallel submissions.

Proposals finally not meeting the formal criteria will be rejected.

Proposals complying with all formal eligibility criteria will be forwarded to the national funding bodies to check if the proposals are in accordance with the national eligibility regulations.

Proposals passing this step will be forwarded to the peer review for evaluation. Evaluation criteria are stated in the call text section 8.2.

4.1.2. Review panel

a) Scientific Reviewers.

The reviewers are to be internationally recognised scientists chosen for their expertise in the field of the call topic, their thematic orientation, their overall expertise in brain health research, and their complementarities with regard to this field. Reviewers should be recruited from as many countries as possible, regardless of whether these countries are represented in the EP BrainHealth or participating in this call. The reviewers are suggested by EP BrainHealth partners, the JCS and nominated by the CSC. The selection of the panel will consider scientific expertise, as well as balanced distribution across countries and gender. The JCS will contact the reviewers to request their participation. Prior to the evaluation at both pre-proposal and full proposal stages, all reviewers will be invited to perform an online test to detect biases on a voluntary basis. The reviewers do not have to communicate the outcome of such a test.

b) Reviewer allocation/assignment.

The JCS will prepare a list of all submitted proposals that may typically include the title of the project, the diseases on which the project focuses, relevant keywords, a list of the project partners and the scientific abstract. This list will be circulated among the PRP and reviewers will be asked to check the list of project partners to identify possible conflicts of interest. In parallel, the JCS will carry out an accompanying check for conflicts of interests (see also section 4.5). Each reviewer will be asked for a self-assignment of the proposals according to their specific expertise.

Based on the reviewers' feedback and the results from the conflicts of interest check, the JCS will prepare a draft assignment of reviewers to all proposals, thereby considering the following principles (when possible):

- Each proposal will be assigned to at least three reviewers. Additional reviewers may be included during the evaluation process, e.g. as a substitute reviewer.
- Each reviewer should at least be assigned to three proposals. If possible, the number of evaluations per reviewer should not exceed ten proposals.

- Where there is no information on self-assignment available, the JCS will make the assignment, thereby matching information from the scientific abstract of the proposal to the reviewers' expertise keywords.
- Reviewers will not be assigned to a proposal if they have a conflict of interest.
- The JCS strives to not assign a reviewer to a proposal whose coordinator comes from the same country as the reviewer.

The final allocation table will be sent to the CSC. This table will include suitable replacements to be contacted in case a review is not sent within one week before the deadline or an issue arises. Support for the assignment task may be sought amongst the CSC funding organisations by the JCS.

c. Scientific written evaluation and scoring.

Scientific reviewers will be asked for written statements and scoring of the proposals according to specific evaluation criteria and a scoring system.

Reviewers will be asked to comment on the main strengths and weaknesses of the proposal as well as to give an overall assessment of each proposal based on the criteria stated in the call text section 8.2. Reviewers will be trusted to consider each main criterion with the suitable emphasis that is relevant to the proposal. The evaluation will be made via the electronic submission system using a common evaluation form.

Score definition for the pre-proposals (scores given by the reviewers will not be communicated to the applicants):

- Excellent (5): clear recommendation for submitting a full proposal
- Very good (4): just below excellent, but room for feasible improvement of certain aspects
- Good (3): the proposal addresses the criterion well, but several shortcomings are present
- Fair (2): major components should be reconsidered or at least adjusted
- Poor (1): clear recommendation for rejection, as at least one of the evaluation criteria is not met or a section of the proposal is strongly underdeveloped

At the pre-proposal stage, half-numbers may be used in order to indicate that a proposal is in between two scores, to facilitate a ranking list with fine gradings, since the numeric ranking is the only basis for the decision on the pre-proposals to be invited to full proposal stage.

d. Out of scope ratings.

Reviewers will be asked to assess if the projects are within the scope of the call. Should a proposal be rated "out of scope", a written evaluation including a score must still be stated by the reviewer. If a single reviewer rates "out of scope" the assessment shall be forwarded to the other assigned reviewers for consideration and reflection. A pre-proposal is rejected as "out of scope" based on an unanimous vote of all three assigned reviewers. All other cases are subject to discussion among the CSC. Only the written evaluation (without a score), including an clarification of the reasons for considering the proposal "out of scope", will be communicated to the applicants.

4.1.3. Consolidation

As soon as the remote evaluation phase is finished and the electronic submission and evaluation system is closed, it will be followed by a consolidation phase. All reviewers involved in the evaluation of a proposal will gain access to all available remote evaluations (written statements and scores) of the respective proposal. Reviewers will be allowed to revise their own evaluation in the light of the

other evaluations within a pre-defined time slot. Any revision of their own evaluation must be justified and will be tracked by the JCS and communicated to the CSC.

It is the aim of the consolidation phase to highlight proposals with disparate evaluations and allow the reviewers to consider their peers' point of view and harmonise the outcome of the remote evaluation when appropriate. However, if no revisions are requested by the reviewers, strongly divergent evaluations will be accepted and no further attempts at harmonisation will be done.

4.1.4. Decision on pre-proposals.

In case a proposal has received scores by less than three reviewers, the missing score(s) will be assumed as the average of the received scores. The scores will be averaged and used to produce a ranking list of the projects. The CSC will aim to divide the proposals according to the ranking list into two categories as follows:

- To be explicitly allowed to submit a full proposal
- To be rejected

The CSC will define the cut-off for pre-proposals selected for the full proposal stage.

Written evaluations of the joint proposals, whether accepted or rejected, will be sent by the JCS to the respective coordinators.

4.1.5. In-between Widening

The CSC may decide to offer the opportunity for additional resources and expertise by using the in-between widening instrument to increase participation of partners, including patient organisations, from underrepresented countries, i.e. countries which are considered undersubscribed or have an oversubscription factor lower than the overall Joint Transnational Calls (JTC) subscription factor in the pre-proposal step. Countries participating in the in-between widening are referred to as "widening countries".

For this, researchers will be invited to include new research partners from the widening countries in their consortium. The inclusion of a partner from one or more of the widening countries is optional and their national eligibility has to be confirmed with the respective funding organisations. The maximum number of partners per consortium is seven. Inclusion of partners from widening countries shall be justified on a scientific basis and be explained in the full proposal. In particular, how the addition of this partner will bring added value to the consortium and which additional tasks will be added to the original work plan as a consequence, will have to be articulated.

The addition of an eligible partner needs to be compatible with the funding commitment of the relevant funding organisation as stated in the MoU.

4.2. Full proposal evaluation

4.2.1. Formal criteria check of proposals, see above (4.1.1.)

4.2.2. Review Panel

a) Scientific Reviewers.

A fraction of the group of reviewers involved in the pre-proposal step, will constitute the PRP and will be invited to an (in person) review meeting. Every effort will be made to balance the panel with regards to genders and geographic distribution (e.g., the number of PRP members from each of the countries participating in the call should not exceed 2). A chair and a vice-chair will be suggested by the JCS and consented to by the CSC. If possible, they should be from countries that do not participate in the joint call.

b) Reviewer allocation/assignment.

At least three reviewers will be assigned for the review of each full proposal. If feasible, a full proposal will be assigned to at least one reviewer who assessed the corresponding pre-proposal, and one newly assigned reviewer. Reviewers will receive all written evaluations of the respective pre-proposal for their information.

c) Scientific written evaluation and scoring.

Reviewers will be asked to provide written reviews and scores via the electronic submission system prior to the meeting.

The reviewers will be encouraged to also read the proposals that were not assigned to them in preparation of the review meeting.

d) Patient Reviewers.

Experienced patient representatives will constitute the patient expert panel. All of them will provide written assessments and part of the group will be invited to the in-person review meeting. Every effort will be made to balance the panel with regards to genders and geographic distribution

e) Written patient evaluation and scoring.

The applicants have to address patient-related questions in a dedicated questionnaire written in layman's terms. The answers to the questionnaire will be the basis for the evaluation of the patients/patient representatives. They will also have access to the full proposal, including the lay summary. If necessary, the JCS will consent with the CSC a subset of the proposals to enter patient review, e.g. proposals including patients or human samples only.

The patient expert panel will evaluate the proposals according to their relevance for patients and their feasibility, and not to the scientific quality. For patient review, a given proposal will be assigned to one or two patients. The patient reviewers will be asked to provide written reviews according to the questionnaire. All written patient reviews will be compiled, and together with the scientific reviews, provided to the members of the review panel and the CSC prior to the panel meeting. Unlike the scientific reviews, there will be no explicit scores in the patient reviews. However, indicators like "+" and "-" may be added to the scientific ranking in order to have clear means to express the patients' assessment during the panel meeting. If the panel decides that this significantly impacts the overall score then the panel may consent to either lower or increase the initial score.

At the panel meeting, each proposal will be assigned to one patient spokesperson among the patient expert panel. They will briefly state the assessment and recommendations from the patient perspective. The patient reviewers will be invited to take part in the discussion. The written recommendations of the patient reviewers will be sent to the applicants along with the funding decision notification letters by the JCS.

f) Ethics review.

An Ethics board consisting of external experts will be assembled. A final panel consisting of ethics experts and including all the relevant expertise will then be consented by the CSC.

The Ethics board will assess the ethical aspects of the full proposals ("ethical considerations"). The ethics reviewers will give written recommendations (1/2-page max.) on the ethical and methodological aspects of the full proposals. They will not give an explicit score. A spokesperson will comment during the discussion at the panel meeting. If the panel decides that this significantly impacts

the overall score then the panel may consider to either lower or increase the initial score. The written recommendations of the ethics reviewers will be sent to the applicants along with the funding decision notification letters by the JCS.

4.2.3. Review panel meeting.

Based on the written reviews collated prior to the meeting, the review panel will discuss each proposal to identify the scientifically excellent proposals recommended for funding and establish a ranking list.

In addition to the scientific evaluations, the patients' views on relevance and feasibility and the ethics assessment will be considered. CSC members can participate in the PRP meetings as observers.

A rapporteur will be assigned to each proposal among the three scientific reviewers. The rapporteur will briefly introduce the proposal to the panel, and provide evaluation comments followed by additions of the other two scientific reviewers. Next, the patient experts will contribute their perspective, and the Ethics reviewers will address if ethical concerns need to be raised. The discussion will then be opened to all the panel members. Upon discussion of a given proposal, the previous scores may be modified.

The rapporteur will be responsible for preparing a joint statement (consensus rapport), i.e. a brief written summary of the discussion, consented by the other two reviewers, completed by the consideration of the patient's views and ethics perspective. The consensus rapports, along with the anonymous written reviews, will be forwarded to the coordinators of the transnational consortia.

For European Commission (EC) co-funded calls, an Independent Observer will be appointed. The independent observer will be an internationally recognised expert who will assess the conformity of the implementation of the joint call and, in particular, review the proper implementation of the independent international peer review and the establishment of the ranking list of transnational projects. The observer's assessment report will be provided to the EC.

4.3. Redress Procedure

Applicants can appeal against the evaluation outcome if they suspect a breach in the application of the evaluation and selection procedures. Requests must:

- be related to the evaluation process, or eligibility checks;
- include a clear description of the grounds for complaint;
- be received by the JCS within the time limit specified, i.e. 7 days after the date of dispatch of the evaluation outcome.

The redress cannot call into question the scientific or technical judgement of appropriately qualified experts. The proposal outcome email containing the results of the evaluation will give information on the appeal procedure, which is:

Upon receipt of an appeal, an acknowledgement of receipt will be sent by the call secretariat. The acknowledgement will report the redress process and the anticipated date by which a decision on the appeal will be communicated to the appellant.

All appeals received by the 7 calendar days deadline will be processed together and the decision will be communicated to the appellant within 7 calendar days from the deadline for submitting the appeals. The redress procedure outlined here does not overrule national appeal rights and procedures.

4.4. Evaluation fees

Scientific reviewers will not be remunerated for their efforts during the evaluation procedure.

4.5. Anonymity, confidentiality and Conflict Of Interest (COI)

Only upon given consent, may the reviewers' names be published on the EP BrainHealth website, without disclosing which proposal the individual reviewers assessed.

All reviewers including the patient and ethics reviewers are required to declare the absence of COI and must refrain from reviewing an application or from discussing a proposal for which a conflict has been identified. A disqualifying conflict of interest exists if a reviewer:

- was involved in the preparation of the proposal,
- benefits professionally, financially or personally from approval or rejection of the proposal,
- has a close family or other personal or professional relationship with an applicant,
- is currently working in an applicant's department or laboratory unit,
- is a director, employee or trustee of an applicant's institution,
- is or was employed by an applicant's institution within the past five years,
- published together with an applicant in the past five years,
- joined a research collaboration together with an applicant in the past five years,
- is in any other situation influencing his or her ability to evaluate the proposal impartially.

Should a conflict of interest be identified, a reviewer will not review the proposal. During the Peer Review Panel meeting, the identified reviewer must leave the meeting room for the time of the discussion of the proposal. In case of any doubts, reviewers should discuss the matter with the JCS or declare these doubts at the PRP meeting.

5. Funding

5.1. Funding decision

The review panel is asked to form categories for funding recommendations (e.g. recommended for funding with high, medium priority and not recommended for funding) strictly according to the final ranking list. The selection of projects for funding by the CSC will follow the PRP recommendations for funding taking into account the available budget.

Upon confirmation of budget availability by the CSC members, the coordinators of consortia selected for funding will be informed by e-mail about the evaluation results by the JCS. Coordinators will be instructed to inform immediately their project partners and ask them to contact their respective funding body.

The project coordinators of non-selected proposals will be informed by e-mail about the evaluation results by the JCS as well.

The e-mails will include comments from the PRP discussion and the written reports of all the reviewers (anonymised) to provide the reasons for rejection to the applicants. Scores will not be shared with the applicants. The coordinators will be instructed to communicate the decisions to their project partners.

The JCS will formally notify the CSC about the final results.

5.2. Funding procedure

Projects are expected to be funded for a period of up to three years. Funding is expected to start within the first half of the following year.

The research partners of successful collaborative projects will be funded directly by the respective national/regional funding organisations in accordance with their terms and conditions, taking into account all other applicable national regulations and legal frameworks. There will be no centralised funding budget administration by the EP BrainHealth.

In order to minimise the variability in the project starting dates between the partners of one consortium, the coordinators are requested to seek a common starting date for all research partners in a consortium and to communicate this date to the involved funding organisations. The goal should be to harmonise the start of individual national contracts as much as possible.

5.3. Responsibilities

Each project must nominate a project coordinator, who represents the consortium externally, is in charge of its internal management (e.g., controlling, reporting, intellectual property rights issues, consortium agreement and data management plan) and will be the main point of contact with the EP BrainHealth regarding management matters.

Within a consortium, each consortium partner will be the main contact person for its own group with the JCS and the relevant national/regional funding organisation.

5.4. Reporting requirements

On behalf of the research consortium, the project coordinator will be required to submit to the monitoring secretariat (neuron@aei.gob.es) a midterm scientific progress report on the project, as well as a final report at the end of the project. Financial reporting will be administered by the national funders. Additionally, the other project partners (PIs) may be required to submit reports separately to their national/regional funding organisation. In that case, reporting guidance will be communicated by the relevant funding organisation.

Ethics approval and/or a positive vote must be obtained from the relevant national or local ethics committee(s) prior to the start of respective studies. This will be required within the first year of the project's runtime, together with the Data Management Plan (DMP) and the Consortium Agreement (CA), which will have to be submitted by the project coordinator to the monitoring secretariat. Documents will be made available to the involved funders. Some funding organisations may require the submission of a DMP, CA, and/or ethical approval at an earlier time point. Please read carefully the funder-specific information section.

The deadline for submitting final reports is two months after the end of the project. The formal end date of the project is the latest runtime in the consortium unless the consortium decides otherwise. It is the task of the coordinators and the monitoring team to monitor the formal end date for project completion. This is required because research groups in the consortium may have different start times. Coordinators will receive the report template in due course from the monitoring team.

The coordinators will be asked to present a progress report during a midterm and an online final symposium. Attendance is mandatory for all coordinators. Accordingly, travel expenses to attend the symposium should be encumbered in the proposed budget plans. Early Career Researchers (ECRs) working on the projects are welcome to join the symposium together with their PIs. One ECR travel per project may be refunded by the EP BrainHealth.

Funding recipients must ensure that all outcomes (publications, etc.) of transnational EP BrainHealth projects include proper acknowledgement of the EP BrainHealth and the respective funding partner organisations¹, and that they are in line with the relevant publication requirements.

5.5. Project runtime extensions

Project runtime extensions can be requested only in well justified cases and should be submitted to national funding bodies' contact points and with monitoring secretariat.

¹ **Proper EP BrainHealth acknowledgement to be used:** This is a European Partnership for BrainHealth (EP BrainHealth) project. The project is supported through the following funding organisations under the aegis of the EP BrainHealth (*list of national/regional organisations who are funding project, by country, in alphabetical order*) e.g. France, Agence Nationale National de la Recherche; United Kingdom, Medical Research Council.

In case of EU cofunded actions add also: This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101259512.