Darwin Plus

Stage 2 Workshop

9th, 15th and 16th December 2021

Webinar and Virtual Workshop Proceedings

In December 2021 a number of events were held for applicants to Darwin Plus Round 10 who had been invited to Stage 2.

On 9th December a webinar session for Stage 2 Darwin Plus applicants was held via Zoom. The webinar focused on frequently asked questions and common issues encountered by applicants and provided the opportunity for applicants to ask any last-minute questions related to their applications. The virtual workshop on 15th December focused on M&E, the effective use of project design tools, and the importance of good evidence and appropriate indicators. On 16th December a presentation given by Amanda Gregory, a member of the Darwin Plus Advisory Group, provided insight for Stage 2 applicants on what makes a good application and allowed applicants to gain a better understanding of the key considerations of the Darwin Plus Advisory Group.

This note covers the frequently asked questions as well as those specific to different areas of the application process and includes answers to these.

The presentations from the day plus the exercise handout can be accessed via the Darwin Plus website: here.

The "Guidance for applicants" and "Finance guidance" documents should be your first reference point if you have queries when developing your application. These can be accessed via Flexi-Grant and also on the Darwin Plus website.

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Webinar Agenda – FAQ and common issues

Agenda Item
Welcome from Defra
Administrative eligibility
Meeting D+ Objectives
Finance
Project team expertise and letters of support
Questions
Avoiding common issues in Flexi-Grant
Gender & safeguarding
Questions
Importance of Communication
Final Questions & Close

Overview of Frequently Asked Questions and Common Issues Webinar

A total of 16 people registered, and 13 people were able to attend. See Annex 1 for details on the spread of people attending the webinar.

The objectives of the session were to:

- Respond to a number of frequently asked questions related to eligibility, finance, Flexi-Grant, gender, safeguarding and communications.
- Provide the opportunity for applicants to ask questions of the Darwin Plus, administrators and Defra.

The webinar was open to Darwin Plus Stage 2 applicants.

Webinar Q&A

Finance

Q. Regarding M&E, can these costs be included in the budget as a separate line item?

A. Yes, you can include these costs as a separate budget line, but there is no requirement to do so, as we recognise M&E costs might include staff time or costs already included under other budget lines.

Q. How close to the 1st May 2022, do we need to plan to start our projects?

A. To maximise the budget spend in the first financial year, Defra would like projects to start as close to 1st May 2022 as possible. However, if there are factors which require a later start date, please clearly explain why you have selected these dates.

Q. Is there a specific % variance for the budget totals that is acceptable for Stage 2 compared to what was included in Stage 1?

A. No, there is no specific variation figure. As Stage 2 requires a more detailed budget, we understand there may be changes in the budget between Stage 1 and Stage 2. These changes may also be a reflection of addressing feedback received in Stage 1. If there are significant changes, please clearly specify and justify these within your cover letter.

Q. You mention we need to take into consideration exchange rates fluctuations but cannot have a "contingency" line. In which budget line would you recommend we budget these rates fluctuations?

A. The requirement is to consider overall how exchange rate fluctuations may affect the budget of your project. This can be done by considering how the exchange rate has changed over the last few years and what to expect in the future in terms of developing your budget. For this reason, it does not necessarily need to be included as a specific line but rather an overall consideration in your budget.

Q. Is there any flexibility on underspends and overspends in each year? I'm thinking along the lines of travel and subsistence where they might need to be some flexibility in when meetings will happen during the project.

A. For Darwin Plus, funding is awarded per financial year. If changes are required to be made to budgets within a financial year, this can be processed by submitting a change request. However, requests to move funds between financial years will be subject to Defra approval and may not always be possible. It is therefore recommended that when developing timelines for your project, activities that may be subject to change are not a planned for near the end of the financial year.

Q. Does the majority of our matched funding being unconfirmed compromise our chances of success?

A. Matched funding is very specific to the context of the project. A key consideration when reviewing your application is the likely impact to the project if matched funding is not successfully secured. It is recommended that if applicants have applied for funding and are waiting for results this should be addressed within the cover letter and relevant questions in the application. Applications which address potential risks related to matched funding are ultimately more competitive than those that are unclear.

Q. We have previously been awarded funding (now complete and closed) to research in the waters of our state partner. This generated a great deal of mostly unpublished results that will be of major benefit for this project and the stakeholders. Can this be included as in-kind contribution/matching funding to the project? The data will be worked on during the project and represents a cost saving as budget would otherwise have to contribute to collect this data as part of the project.

A. Many of our projects are often building on previous work and therefore the preference would be to not include this as matched funding in the first instance, not least as matched funding should focus on the Darwin Plus period of funding. However, it could be included as Value for Money and is definitely a benefit of the project to be included within the application.

Q. Regarding Q24. 'Financial Controls.' Given we are a large public university with a substantial financial admin department - how much do we need to add here about experience?

A. Please provide any experience which demonstrates managing project spend and how you intend to manage the finances for your project between the project team and finance department. Often large organisations have experienced teams in place, but the project and finance department do not have a close relationship. Therefore, any information detailing how you intend to manage finances for your proposed project should be included.

Administration

Q. You mention the cover letter - is that where you should address feedback from the Stage 1 process (as well as in the Stage 2 document where possible)

A. Yes, the cover letter provides the opportunity to specifically address any feedback you have received in your Stage 1 application. Additionally, if there are any feedback points you have not addressed or disagree with, you can also use the cover letter to provide an explanation of why this decision has been made. However, please ensure that you also integrate your responses to this feedback in the body of your application as well (signposting these changes in your cover letter can be particularly helpful).

Q. Q12 and Q23 both allude to how we'll be building on existing work. We want to make sure that we are answering both questions fully and giving the information that you need but are conscious of being repetitive. Please can you clarify the differences between these questions and what you are looking for?

A. When addressing Q12, applicants should focus on the methodology and proposed evidence-based approach. This section can also be used to identify if the project addresses previous work and you have the option to include references in your additional documents. The focus of Q23 is more on the financial aspect of the project rather than the technical. This question is therefore most interested in what funding has come before and a demonstration of an awareness of other work being carried out in and around the geographical and technical area the project is working in.

Q. There is a very limited wordcount for Q33 (Describe briefly the aims, activities and achievements of your organisation. Large organisations please note that this should describe your unit or department.) Do you have any guidance on what you're looking for / what would be helpful to include here?

A. This question provides the opportunity for the applicant to introduce their organisation and the type of work the organisation is involved with. For examples, please refer to the Darwin Plus website for previous application forms and how applicants have approached this in the past.

Q. If a later start date than proposed in Stage 1 is deemed more appropriate for Stage 2, is there scope to extend the end of the project beyond the 3 year deadline so that the project duration remains the same (e.g. if it originally ran to the end of the 3 year period)?

A. At this point the 31st March 2025 end date is fixed.

Q. If our organisational Handbook and Policies and Procedures Manual includes sections on safeguarding and whistleblowing, do we need to prepare standalone documents for each of these or will these larger manuals/handbooks suffice?

A. If your organisation already works with the required policies then these policies can be included as an extract from the handbook. If unable to prepare an extract from the handbook, please upload the handbook, but ensure you reference which page numbers are relevant in the cover letter.

Technical

Q. Please could you outline what you expect to see for the 'materials and methods' part of Q12 on the application form – and how this compares to what should be included in the logframe and activities sections of the form

A. The narrative methodology should be a cohesive statement outlining how you will complete your project, addressing who will carry out the work and the selected approach. The activities section is a lighter touch which requires a summary of the basic activities your project will conduct, with a recommended maximum word count of 25 words per activity. There should be overlap between your methodology, activities and logframe however, the methodology should be more of a narrative and expanded version of the list of activities you have included in your logframe.

Project Staff

Q. We have an unfilled post at Stage 1. Can we name someone to fill the post for Stage 2?

A. Yes, at Stage 2 please include names in posts if confirmed. It is also accepted if names have changed between Stages as we understand work requirements and commitments can often change.

Q. If we need to recruit a new role as part of the project, should we include recruitment specifically as an activity in the implementation timetable?

A. This will most likely be context dependent per project. Activities are typically numbered against the Outputs identified which project management activities may not necessarily fit within. However, if it is helpful to include recruitment and meetings within activities you can. We would not typically expect recruitment or project management activities to appear as indicators.

General

Q. What sort of activities do you/we cover in the workshop on Wednesday?

A. The M&E Workshop focuses on project design tools and specific components of the logframe. The session is useful for familiarising applicants with logframes, confirming expectations of what Darwin Plus is looking for and for engaging with other applicants. The workshop is composed of presentations and interaction group work using online software.

Selected Webinar Feedback

How useful did you find the webinar?

Of the 13 people who attended the webinar, 5 attendees provided feedback. All 5 attendees reported finding the webinar **very useful**.

How did you find the pace of the webinar?

Out of the 13 attendees a total of 13 provided feedback during the session on the pace of the webinar. 12 found the pace of the webinar **just right**, with 1 stating it was **a bit slow**.

Please share your thoughts on what you found useful

I didn't have a lot of specific questions, but the devil is in the details and there are a few things I had not interpreted correctly or thought of when looking at the questions.

All 3 presenters were knowledgeable.

Specifically, the comments on matching funding to clarify points.

Explanation of new questions in this round and more on safeguarding policy. It was good to hear common mistakes made.

Information on Stage 2 requirements.

Do you have any recommendations for how we can improve?

None at present. Perhaps show more examples or make examples (or parts therein) available for reference for the individual sections.

A quick run through of the entire application, but its long so this would take a lot of time.

Nothing, the session discussed what I expected.

Other comments submitted as feedback

Thank you for the presentations, we have been involved or led many Darwin projects but it's always good to get feedback on advice on how to improve! Also, happy to see Eilidh after all these years of emailing with her! She is always extremely helpful!

Thank you!

Nope it was very clear.

M&E Virtual Workshop session: Project design tools and importance of good evidence and indicators

Agenda

Agenda Item
Introduction to the Workshop
Project Design Tools - Why use project design tools - Articulating your "pathway to change" Group Exercise: Introducing effective logframe development
Break
The Importance of Good Evidence and Appropriate Indicators - Identifying SMART indicators - Collecting and reporting evidence Group Exercise: SMART indicators and means of verification
Workshop Close

A total of 19 people registered, and 18 people were able to attend.

Key points or common issues arising from the virtual workshops:

Project Design Tools

Key observations from participants in the logframe and theory of change exercises included:

- It was challenging to differentiate between Outputs and the project activities which were presented for the exercise. As the Outputs and activities provided were vague, it was difficult to align them against each other, and the process of grouping activities together was helpful in understanding the Outputs. This highlighted the importance of ensuring applicants' own logframes were clear in distinguishing between these elements.
- The Problem/Impact/Outcome statements were easier to locate than the Outputs and activities. These higher-level statements helped frame an understanding of the other elements in the logframe. Once the exercise was completed, revisiting the Problem Statement to be clear that the outlined project addressed all elements in the Problem Statement was a useful exercise.
- It was slightly unclear how one Outcome can achieve the desired impact of a project. It is likely that there was a big "leap of faith" between these two statements that needed to be revisited/considered.
- The importance of being consistent with the wording used in the Outcome statement and the related Outputs was highlighted.

The Importance of Good Evidence and Appropriate Indicators

Key observations from participants in the indicators and evidence exercise included:

- It was challenging to differentiate between Indicators and Means of Verification presented in the exercise. Because the wording of the indicators was not SMART, they were hard to identify and interpret.
- Indicators must be SMART and consider baselines and targets/expected change.
- The importance of discussing and sharing opinions while developing logframes. By drawing on a 'critical friend' you can help develop a stronger overall design which stands up to external scrutiny.
- The importance of language in presenting clear indicators and Means of Verification.

‘What Makes a Good Application?’ – DPAG Presentation

A total of 18 people registered, and 18 people were able to attend.

Q&A

Q. The safeguarding policy is not something we have yet as the lead partner as this is not common practice in our OT. Can we use our UK project partner's safeguarding policy to guide us and submit?

A. As long as the project is adhering to the safeguarding policy provided, this is acceptable. However, please ensure you acknowledge this in your cover letter.

Q. Is it essential to use an external consultant for Monitoring and Evaluation?

A. There is no expectation that this would be completed externally. Many of our projects manage M&E internally and others have a combination of both. You should complete this is in whichever way works best for your project. Please note all templates for Half Year Reports, Annual Reports and Final Reports can be found on our website. When thinking about your M&E now, you might find it helpful to consider the reporting requirements you will be asked for. M&E often takes longer than people anticipate.

Q. If it has not been possible to establish a baseline prior to submitting the application, what should we do?

A. If it is not possible to establish a baseline prior to the application deadline, please indicate when this will be established. Linked to this, if you are struggling to define appropriate indicators or targets without a clear baseline, please provide at least an idea within your application to enable the DPAG to make an assessment of your project value for money. This may be developed from previous project knowledge or other evidence/best practice, which you can clarify in your methodology and link to specific references in your additional documents. Once your project is up and running you can submit a Change Request to clarify this point further.

Annex 1 – FAQ and Common Issues webinar attendee summary