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INSPIRE

Research Infrastructure Programme

Governing Framework

Contents

1. Background & Context	3
1.1 Programme for Government and National Development Plan	3
1.2 Programme enables next phase of development of Ireland's R&I ecosystem	4
2. Key Principles underpinning INSPIRE Programme	6
3. Setting the Stage: Scope & Critical Considerations.....	7
3.1 Local Institutional Infrastructure	7
3.2 Shared Advanced Infrastructures	7
3.3 Institutional Strategic Alignment	8
3.4 Alignment with Enterprise and Industrial Policy Priorities	8
3.5 Alignment with Talent Development Programmes	8
3.6 Strategic Oversight	9
3.7 Central Role of the Agencies	10
4. INSPIRE Phase One - Establishing Strategic Foundations.....	11
4.1 Overview and Key Elements	11
4.2 Strategic Fit Review	13
4.3 Local Institutional Infrastructure	13
4.4 Expressions of Interest for Shared Advanced Infrastructure: Design and Assessment	13
5. INSPIRE Phase Two Advancing Shared National Capacity through Competitive Investment	16
5.1 Full Proposals for Shared Advanced Infrastructures	17
6. Development of a National Research Infrastructure Access Portal.....	21
7. Maintenance and Technical Support	22
8. Funding Conditions and Post-Award Monitoring.....	23
8.1 Main Funding Conditions	23
8.2 Institutional Procedures	24
8.3 Agency Oversight and Performance Monitoring	24

1. Background & Context

1.1 Programme for Government and National Development Plan

In line with *Impact 2030* and in response to the Programme for Government commitment to examine a funding stream for research infrastructure¹ the Minister established a Working Group to advance this issue in March 2025. Chaired by this Department, membership was made up of Research Ireland, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (DETE), the institutional representative organisations and two experts nominated by the Minister.

The Working Group recommended investment in three distinct yet inter-related types (Pillars) of research infrastructure. These comprise: -

- **Local institutional equipment** used routinely for teaching and / or research within a higher education institution and,
- **Large scale shared advanced infrastructures** designed for collaboration across multiple institutions and sectors, to strengthen Ireland's competitiveness, drive national innovation, and deliver broader public good impact.
- The third pillar of infrastructure considered by the Group relates to more system-level capabilities, for example High-Performance Computing and the Tyndall Institute expansion.

The INSPIRE Programme outlined in this Framework comprises the first two pillars recommended by the Working Group, i.e. investment in local institutional research equipment and in shared advanced infrastructures. The Framework is a living document, subject to review by DFHERIS to ensure adherence with all relevant public financial procedures.

¹Encompassing inter alia scientific and technical equipment, data and advanced computing infrastructure, specialised hardware and software, digital platforms and archives, curated collections and exhibition spaces, as well as the technical support essential to enabling research and innovation across all disciplines. This may include refurbishment or adaptation works necessary to ensure the effective installation, operation, and functionalisation of the infrastructure, but does not extend to any major or very substantial capital construction.

The business case for research infrastructure formed a major component of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's submission to the National Development review that has been completed recently by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

The Programme is currently scheduled to run from 2026 until 2030. As further capital investment planning is undertaken in the coming years, it will be important to ensure that an investment stream of this type continues to be factored in beyond the lifetime of this Programme, and that international common practice such as the development of a national research infrastructure roadmap is progressed during its lifetime as discussed further below.

DFHERIS will ensure that the INSPIRE Programme and its funding will be subject to ongoing detailed engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to ensure alignment with and adherence to relevant public financial procedures and National Infrastructure Office guidelines regarding major capital investment, in particular with regard to value for money, including progressing these matters via the Major Project Advisory Group where appropriate.

1.2 Programme enables next phase of development of Ireland's R&I ecosystem

INSPIRE carries forward the good practices seen in the original Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL), for example, the focus on the institution and the strategic alignment of investment with institutional priorities and national policy objectives. It is being launched at a very different time in the development of the national research and innovation (R&I) system. When PRTL was launched a quarter of a century ago, it was the effective start of the Government's substantive and strategic investment in that system. It reflected the recognition that Ireland's main path to economic growth lay in its development as a knowledge-intensive economy. The core objective then appropriately was to start to build public research capability and, with that, to increase the research intensity of the higher education sector. As well as realising those goals, PRTL supported the Higher Education Institutions to become more strategic in their research activities and therefore more responsive to national policy objectives.

Today Ireland's national R&I system looks markedly different to how it did at the outset of PRTL. In 2023, Government investment in R&I surpassed the €1bn mark for the first time ever. Irish researchers (in both the public and private sectors) have now won more than €1bn from Horizon Europe. The corporate strategies of Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland highlight research and innovation as a key competitive advantage for Ireland. Higher Education and Public Sector R&D spend has more than doubled in the last two decades and there are now over 12,000 research students studying for PhD and Masters programmes. Ireland's

universities have significantly expanded their research activity, with sustained growth in research expenditure and capacity across all disciplines and playing a pivotal role in shaping Ireland's global research footprint. There are now five Technological Universities established in Ireland for which the main differentiator from their predecessor institutions is their research mandate and its impact on their curricula and regional enterprise engagement.

In terms of the overarching development of the national R&I system, under *Impact 2030*, DFHERIS - working with its agencies, in cooperation with other Government Departments as well of course as the sector itself - is striving to develop the higher education research system into a truly cohesive national system, one that minimises fragmentation and duplication of activity. Additionally, it is working to ensure that this system serves as a national resource, one that continues to advance academic excellence in Ireland while also actively contributing through impact to the achievement of national policy objectives, for example, as set out in the Action Plan for Competitiveness and Productivity.

INSPIRE offers an unprecedented opportunity to achieve these twin goals. Local Institutional Infrastructure recognises the integral relationship between teaching, research and innovation activities in Higher Education Institutions. Shared Advanced Infrastructures envisages incentivising institutional partnerships, including encouraging applicants to partner on such infrastructures where multiple of the same items are requested. For all infrastructure funded under INSPIRE it is envisaged that agencies will support institutions in embedding consistent and equitable practices in implementation, ensuring a consistent experience for all users.

Research infrastructure funded under INSPIRE, while located in the higher education sector, will be a publicly funded national resource. This framing will be reflected in the central access portal, the evaluation criteria for funding applications, and the post-award reporting and monitoring. At the same time, institutions will retain responsibility for hosting and managing the equipment, including associated costs, liability, and ensuring sustained usage over its lifecycle. These dual roles will be communicated clearly through the Programme's communications campaign.

2. Key Principles underpinning INSPIRE Programme

The overarching intent of INSPIRE is to ensure that Higher Education Institutions are equipped with modern, high-quality research infrastructure to enable them to deliver on both national priorities and their institutional strategies for both talent development and innovation across disciplines. In doing so, INSPIRE aims to position the sector to achieve research excellence, address global and societal challenges, enhance Ireland's international reputation, and contribute meaningfully to national productivity, resilience and long-term competitiveness.

To achieve this strategic intent, the Working Group agreed the following investment principles:

- *Institution-Led Proposals*: The Programme will be institutionally focused. This will ensure integration with long-term strategic planning and avoid fragmentation of effort or duplication of capability.
- *Strategic Alignment*: Investments must clearly align with the host institution's strategic research priorities and demonstrate their contribution to wider national objectives, including those articulated in *Impact 2030* and the National Development Plan.
- *Institutional Capability and Readiness*: Proposals must demonstrate the institution's capacity to manage, maintain and maximise the performance of the infrastructure, including evidence of robust governance and monitoring structures.
- *Excellence-based and Impact-Driven Investment*: Infrastructure proposals will be assessed on their potential to deliver national impact – including the development of highly skilled graduates, facilitation of enterprise collaboration, and the capacity to attract international research funding and to attract / retain talent.
- *Collaborative Potential (for Shared Infrastructures)*: Where infrastructure is designed to serve as a shared resource, proposals must demonstrate strong potential for inter-institutional, interdisciplinary, or cross-sectoral collaboration – ensuring optimal return on public investment and enhancing Ireland's research competitiveness.
- *Shared Access and Sustainability*: Funded infrastructures must incorporate structured access for all equipment users – within the host institution, across other institutions and by external organisations. Proposals must also include robust sustainability planning, including maintenance and technical staffing along with lifecycle management. These elements will form a core part of the assessment process.

3. Setting the Stage: Scope & Critical Considerations

3.1 Local Institutional Infrastructure

Local institutional infrastructure refers to essential facilities, equipment and resources embedded within individual Higher Education Institutions that underpin day-to-day training and research. These may range from laboratory instrumentation and technical equipment in STEM fields to digital archives, specialist software, creative practice studios, and secure data environments including in AHSS. It does not encompass general institutional infrastructures beyond the research mission of the institution, for example, student records systems. Typically costing between €25,000 and €500,000, research infrastructure under this strand is core to the delivery of high-quality doctoral training and impactful research and plays a foundational role in the education of highly skilled graduates. For the very high proportion of PhD candidates who pursue careers beyond academia, the quality and real-world relevance of their training depend on consistent access to state-of-the-art equipment. Just as importantly, modern and reliable infrastructure is a prerequisite for producing world-class research and for attracting and retaining top research talent, both from Ireland and internationally.

The Working Group found that this infrastructure is used across institutions for both talent development and research and innovation. Because infrastructure is integrated into student learning, doctoral training, and research practice, it must be located where these activities take place.

3.2 Shared Advanced Infrastructures

Shared advanced infrastructures refer to high-value, high-performance research infrastructure – including facilities, equipment, data resources, and other specialised research assets – typically exceeding €500,000 or comprising integrated suites – that support specialised and often interdisciplinary research. Given their scale and potential for broader use, these investments are best delivered through coordinated, multi-institutional approaches. Strategic investment in this type of advanced equipment – driven by institutional and national research priorities and supported by shared access models – is essential to maintain Ireland's global competitiveness in high-value research domains.

Under this Programme and consistent with the original PRTL, it is envisaged that the Expressions of Interest will be submitted by the institution. The purpose of the EoI phase is to

provide a system-level view of infrastructure needs and emerging potential opportunities across the sector, enabling Government and agencies to identify areas of overlap, potential for sharing, high-demand domains, and niche requirements. This will also be considered alongside the broader institutional infrastructure upgrade plans.

Consideration will also be given in this context to how best to support high-risk high-reward proposals (i.e. “white space”) that demonstrate exceptional potential to create new research capabilities, cross-disciplinary platforms, or transformative national capacity.

3.3 Institutional Strategic Alignment

It is envisaged that each Higher Education Institution will be the ‘unit’ for funding applications, assessment processes and post-award monitoring procedures. This approach is to provide that the most effective way to ensure that investments made under this Programme are fully aligned with institutional strategies – encompassing research performance, teaching and learning, knowledge transfer and research commercialisation – while also maximising their contribution to national economic and societal objectives. In line with the Programme’s strategic objectives, all investments must be underpinned by research excellence and demonstrate clear pathways to impact, including economic, societal, and environmental dimensions, from launch through to completion.

3.4 Alignment with Enterprise and Industrial Policy Priorities

The external engagement and relevance of the infrastructure including its accessibility to enterprise, will be a core consideration throughout the Programme. For local institutional infrastructure, institutional plans must demonstrate how the investment will support high-quality graduate training and research aligned with societal and economic needs. For Shared Advanced Infrastructures, proposals must outline how the infrastructure will enable open and transparent access for all potential users – academics, enterprise (including both SMEs and FDI), and public bodies – while complying with State Aid rules and contributing to national innovation capacity.

3.5 Alignment with Talent Development Programmes

There is an integral relationship between talent and research infrastructure in any higher education institution. The quality of graduate and postdoctoral formation relies upon the

quality of the equipment upon which students and researchers can develop their skills. The Local Institutional Infrastructure investments under INSPIRE are critical to doctoral training in Ireland, as well as to relatively routine core research activities in a higher education institution. Each institution's autonomy in how they deploy their funding under this strand means that they will be empowered to use it across all research disciplines as they see best fit. The funding that will be awarded for Shared Advanced Infrastructures, and the far greater accessibility of these infrastructures reflecting the proposed central access portal, mean that researchers who are progressing through their career stages and regardless of their host institution and employer, will have the opportunity to access this equipment and, with that, to advance their work and their career.

The INSPIRE Programme is critical for the successful delivery of the agencies' talent development programmes. For example, the attraction of outstanding international researchers to Ireland through Research Ireland's Global Talent Initiative will be shaped by the standard of research equipment in the institutions to which they may come. The standard of PhD student and researcher development, as articulated in the National Framework for Doctoral Education and the Principles of Good Practice in Research within Higher Education Institutions whose implementation is led by the HEA, depends significantly on the quality of the learning and research environment.

3.6 Strategic Oversight

INSPIRE is a major and complex investment programme with significant stakeholder expectations in terms of its potentially transformative impact on the higher education research system, and on that system's resultant impact on national policy objectives for Ireland's competitiveness agenda. Its successful implementation will require strong cohesion and cooperation, in the first instance, between the Department, the HEA and Research Ireland.

To this end it is envisaged that a Strategic Oversight Advisory Group will be established composed of these three organisations, chaired by DFHERIS and with the participation of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. The purpose of this Group will be to ensure:

- Programme implementation and delivery according to the timelines agreed with DFHERIS at the outset.
- The adoption of an aligned and cohesive approach across the whole of the Programme to ensure maximum effectiveness and outcomes consistent with the distinct and differentiated roles of each agency.
- A clear communications campaign through phases of the Programme.
- Development of standardised KPIs to enable system-level reporting to DFHERIS throughout the Programme, and to underpin DFHERIS' articulation of the value of this Programme,

- Alignment of INSPIRE with other major strategic capability-building investments of the agencies.
- Alignment of INSPIRE with the agencies' talent development programmes, from PhD students to researchers at all career stages, as well as the institutions' own activities.
- Refinement of the overarching policy approach as outlined in this Framework as INSPIRE progresses.

An important responsibility of this Group will be to consider and plan for continuity beyond the lifetime of this Programme. In parallel, the Group will also examine the case for developing a National Research Infrastructure Roadmap, in line with international good practice. Such a roadmap would represent a major undertaking, requiring extensive consultation across government departments, agencies, Higher Education Institutions, enterprise, and alignment with EU and international infrastructure priorities. First steps towards its development will be important to provide long-term direction and underpin future continuity, with the intention that there would be clarity on the direction of a future National Research Infrastructure Roadmap for Ireland to align with the conclusion of *Impact 2030* in 2030 and the commencement of Ireland's next national research and innovation strategy.

3.7 Central Role of the Agencies

It is envisaged that the HEA and Research Ireland will administer activity across all Programme dimensions consistent with their statutory role and responsibilities, with the HEA leading on Local Institutional Infrastructure and Research Ireland on Shared Advanced Infrastructures: all under the aegis of the Strategic Advisory Oversight Group

This will include (but is not limited) to the following:

- Pre-award processes for their respective elements including INSPIRE promotion, development of call documentation, management of the application and assessment processes.
- Full and active participation in the Strategic Oversight Advisory Group.
- Regular and timely post-award monitoring and reporting to DFHERIS at system-level as well as institutional level.
- Development and ongoing management of the central access portal.
- Ensuring systemic and consistent operationalisation of good practices in research equipment purchase, management, access and sustainability, etc. by all institutions.
- Adherence to all relevant public financial procedures.

4. INSPIRE Phase One - Establishing Strategic Foundations

4.1 Overview and Key Elements

Phase One of the Programme is designed to establish a coordinated, strategic baseline across the Higher Education sector with the objective of ensuring that all subsequent investments are embedded in institutional priorities and aligned with national objectives.

To achieve this objective under this phase, it is envisaged that each Higher Education Institution will submit its plans in response to the call documentation developed jointly by the HEA and Research Ireland under the aegis of the Strategic Oversight Advisory Group. These may cover:

- a) The strategic fit of the totality of investment being sought by the institution under the INSPIRE Programme with its advancement and acceleration of institutional and national priorities.
- b) The institution's application for Local Institutional Infrastructure funding.
- c) Its Expressions of Interest for Shared Advanced Infrastructures.

Confirmation at the outset of the Higher Education Institution's overall strategic fit will provide the platform upon which each agency will implement their respective elements of the Programme. The institution's application to the HEA will include the strategic fit element which will be assessed by the agency in consultation with Research Ireland under the aegis of the Strategic Advisory Group. The scale and substance of the plans to be submitted by each Higher Education Institution under Phase One will be reflected in the time allowed to prepare these submissions, while also bearing in mind budgetary drawdown requirements.

The proposals for investment in Local Institutional Infrastructure and the Expressions of Interest for investment in Shared Advanced Infrastructure from Higher Education Institutions under Phase One of the Programme will be reviewed and assessed by HEA and Research Ireland respectively consistent with their statutory functions and responsibilities. Plans submitted by each higher education institution may, as appropriate, be shared for information with the counterpart agency under the auspices of the Strategic Oversight Advisory Group.

The **strategic fit** element of each institution's submission will set out its ambitions, capabilities and the strategic importance of proposed INSPIRE investments. It will provide the platform for all funding awarded, ensuring that all funding applications are strongly anchored in their strategic fit with institutional and national research priorities. All applicant institutions must have demonstrated satisfactory strategic fit prior to the agencies' respective assessments of elements (b) and (c) above of an institution's plans.

In terms of **Local Institutional Infrastructure**, it is envisaged that building on the strategic fit review, each higher education institution will be expected to make a detailed proposal for investment to the HEA based on key and essential requirements set out on an evidence- based and prioritised basis in terms of its institutional research strategy to address urgent equipment and infrastructure deficits.

Having regard to **Shared Advanced Infrastructures**, it is envisaged that each higher education institution will have the opportunity to submit focused Expressions of Interest to Research Ireland for high-value, high-performance research infrastructure providing a clear and concise analysis of priorities aligned with institutional research strategies. It will again build on the platform provided by the strategic fit review. The purpose of the Expressions of Interest is to provide a system-level map of advanced infrastructure needs, highlight areas of overlap or shared potential, and indicate where future large-scale investments may be most impactful. This stage will function as a system-wide synthesis phase, focused on shaping collaboration, rather than narrowing the field. Therefore, it is intended to enable feedback to applicant Higher Education Institutions on where there is a potential for further prospective inter-institutional partnerships in line with a national system perspective.

By structuring Phase One in this way, the Programme is anticipated to create a clear bridge between immediate institutional investments and future shared system-level infrastructures. It ensures that both strands of the Programme – institutional upgrades and strategic shared facilities – are grounded in coherent institutional strategies, embedded in system-wide priorities, and sequenced for maximum long-term impact. This will ensure that both dimensions of INSPIRE are delivered in an aligned cohesive and coherent way.

This aims to ensure that responses from Higher Education Institutions are well aligned with national research and innovation priorities and fit-for-future-purpose, to ensure that the programme overall delivers: -

- Maximum impact and effectiveness in responding to critical infrastructure deficits and opportunities,
- A clear understanding of areas of national strength and strategic alignment to guide coordinated investment in shared advanced infrastructures.
- Identification of the Shared Advanced Infrastructure proposals with the potential to strengthen the national research system for development in Phase Two of the Programme; and
- Continued close alignment of the programme with Ireland's broader strategic priorities for research and innovation.

The assessments by the agencies and the work of the Strategic Oversight Advisory Group can draw on input, feedback and advice from other relevant Departments and agencies (e.g. Enterprise Ireland and IDA) to help secure a whole-of-government approach to a major programme of investment under the NDP. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will also engage bilaterally with the agencies to effectively and appropriately discharge its responsibilities on behalf of the Minister.

4.2 Strategic Fit Review

There is planned to be a strategic fit review which will assess how each institution's submission aligns with its own strategy and national priorities. It is likely to consider:

- Institutional research capacity and strategic capability.
- Track record in research performance and management of public funding.
- How proposed INSPIRE investments will accelerate delivery of institutional priorities across research excellence, talent development, international collaboration, and reputation.
- The expected contribution to Ireland's competitiveness and innovation capacity, including engagement with SMEs/ micro-enterprises and start-ups, support for strategic economic sectors spanning from deep-tech to the creative industries, and wider societal and regional impact, as appropriate for the relevant discipline.
- For local infrastructure: the impact on the quality and employment-readiness of graduate output, and on research activities across the institution and across research disciplines.
- For shared advanced infrastructures: the quality of EoIs particularly their national relevance, scope for collaboration and complementarity, potential to strengthen institutional research capacity and competitiveness, and alignment with national and sectoral strategies, for example, in semiconductors, renewable energy or life sciences.

4.3 Local Institutional Infrastructure

Once the strategic fit element of the institution's submission is deemed satisfactory in consultation with the Strategic Oversight Advisory Group, the HEA is expected to evaluate the applications from the Higher Education Institutions for funding to address their Local Institutional Infrastructure needs. In reviewing the totality of these applications, as well as ensuring compliance with all public procurement procedures, the HEA will consider where there may be opportunities to drive further value-for-money through any collective procurement of equipment by the institutions.

4.4 Expressions of Interest for Shared Advanced Infrastructure: Design and Assessment

Expressions of Interest for Shared Advanced Infrastructures will be reviewed by Research Ireland in Phase One, again once the institution's strategic fit has been deemed satisfactory and in consultation with the HEA under the aegis of the Strategic Oversight Advisory Group.

Research Ireland's EoI review will focus on national relevance, potential for collaboration, institutional strengthening, and readiness to progress to Phase Two. Following assessment, institutions will receive structured feedback and, where appropriate, guidance on developing coordinated or joint full proposals for Phase Two, which will subsequently be subject to robust international peer-review.

To support this strategic mapping exercise, Expressions of Interest will need to be concise and succinct and include the following main elements:

- **Description** of the proposed infrastructure, its intended research purpose, concise technical and functional capabilities, and its potential to strengthen national research capacity.
- **Strategic Relevance** to institutional priorities and national R&I objectives.
- **Indicative Scale of Investment**, without the need for detailed costing at this stage.
- **Institutional Readiness** – brief indication of building suitability, available technical support, and any known access or compliance considerations.
- **Preliminary Collaboration Interest** – identification of potential partners or user groups, referencing any initial discussions, shared interests, or indications of wider demand or relevance across the system.
- **Preliminary Outline** of access models, governance approach, and sustainability considerations, sufficient to demonstrate feasibility and institutional commitment.
- **Prioritisation** within the institution's broader infrastructure ambitions – including how the proposed infrastructure complements, rather than duplicates, existing national capabilities, and a rationale for its sequencing relative to other institutional priorities.

Institutions will not be expected to provide detailed technical specifications, formal governance frameworks, or confirmed partnerships at this stage. These will be developed during the full proposal phase, informed by insights developed through the Expression of Interest process. The purpose of this stage is to inform strategic planning and strengthen collaboration and guiding Higher Education Institutions towards the coordinated development of full proposals in Phase Two.

Expressions of Interest for Shared Advanced Infrastructure: Feedback and Eligibility to Proceed

As an integral part of Phase One, Research Ireland following consultation with the Strategic Oversight Advisory Group will assess each institutional submission against the **key elements of the Expression of Interest**. The main purpose of this review is to inform strategic planning, strengthen collaboration, and guide institutions toward the coordinated development of full proposals in Phase Two. However, during this phase any Expressions of Interest not sufficiently aligned with the objectives of the Programme will not be approved to proceed to full proposals.

Feedback to institutions and consortia is likely to focus on:

- **Eligibility to proceed** – confirmation that the proposed shared advanced infrastructure is suitable to progress to the full proposal stage under the Programme's objectives.

- **Strategic alignment** – the extent to which the infrastructure aligns with institutional priorities and national objectives, with recommendations for refinement where appropriate.
- **Indicative Investment and Readiness** – observations on the proposed scale of investment and any early indications of institutional readiness, including technical support and building suitability.
- **Collaborative potential** – identification of opportunities for inter-institutional and/or cross-sectoral collaboration, based on expressions of shared interest, complementary expertise, and wider system demand.
- **Access and Governance Considerations** – initial feedback on proposed access models and governance approaches, including feasibility and openness to broader user groups.
- **Institutional prioritisation and Complementarity** – assessment of the quality of the institution’s prioritised infrastructures, including guidance on sequencing and how proposed infrastructures complement or connect with existing or emerging national capabilities.
- **System-wide perspective** – areas of overlap, potential duplication and complementarities will be identified highlighting opportunities for collaboration and consolidation that may not have been evident at the institutional level. This will help highlight synergies and encourage the formation of coherent, high-impact consortia in Phase Two.

Envisaged Phase One Outcomes:

- Confirmation of whether institutional strategic infrastructure submissions demonstrate satisfactory **strategic fit** to proceed.
- **Allocation of funding for Local Institutional Infrastructure following assessment by the HEA** contingent on the institutional strategic submission meeting strategic fit requirements as set out above.
- **Contribution to maintenance support** for local institutional infrastructure.
- **Structured feedback on Eols** for shared advanced infrastructures will be provided on national relevance, complementarity, and collaboration opportunities, with a view to strengthening and consolidating proposals for Phase Two. This process will encourage alignment among overlapping Eols and support the formation of coherent, high-impact consortia.

5. INSPIRE Phase Two Advancing Shared National Capacity through Competitive Investment

Phase Two – Advancing Shared National Capacity through Competitive Investment

Based on the system-level view established through the strategic fit review under Phase One of the Programme, Phase Two is expected to focus on the coordinated development of full proposals for shared national research infrastructure. Institutions are likely to be invited to make full proposals where their Expressions of Interest have been confirmed as eligible and where collaboration, complementarity, or consolidation opportunities have been fully explored. These proposals will then be assessed by a robust international peer review panel to ensure excellence, impact, and alignment with national priorities.

This approach ensures that all proposals entering Phase Two have been developed in the context of national infrastructure needs, institutional strategies, and system-wide opportunities for collaboration.

Key features of Phase Two include:

- **Competitive Evaluation through International Peer Review**
Full proposals will be assessed through a rigorous, excellence-based process, including an international peer review panel, to ensure that investments meet global standards in terms of scientific quality, collaborative strength, and alignment with national research and innovation objectives.
- **Focus on System-Wide Impact**
Proposals must demonstrate how the proposed infrastructure will:
 - Advance institutional strategies in research, talent development, and innovation.
 - Enable cross-sectoral and inter-institutional collaboration.
 - Deliver national impact, including international competitiveness, societal benefit, and enterprise engagement.
- **Institutional Maintenance and Support**
To ensure effective operation and long-term sustainability, each institution will receive a contribution to maintenance and technical support, calculated as a function of infrastructure funding eventually awarded. Rather than being tied to individual pieces of equipment, this flexible funding model empowers institutions to deploy resources strategically – ensuring maximum uptime, usability, and system-level benefit. Institutions will report to the relevant Lead Agency on budget usage to ensure accountability and continuous improvement.

Phase Two will, therefore, build on the foundations established in Phase One moving from strategic mapping and early feedback to coordinated development and competitive investment in large-scale, shared infrastructures.

Structuring Phase Two in this way, the Programme ensures that proposals entering the competitive stage have benefited from prior consolidation, strengthened partnerships, and enhanced alignment across institutions and sectors, as assessed under the EoI element of Phase One. This approach allows shared infrastructures to be assessed to international standards, and supported for long-term sustainability, while maximising their collective value to the national research and innovation system.

During Phase Two and considering the outcomes of Phase One, how to best support high-risk high-reward proposals will be explored. This will ensure that Ireland's public research system is fit-for-purpose and open to disruptive ideas.

Throughout all stages of the Programme, adherence to the Public Spending Code and public procurement rules will be paramount.

5.1 Full Proposals for Shared Advanced Infrastructures

The main element of the full proposals for Shared Advanced Infrastructure which as set out above will be subject to rigorous international panel review are likely to comprise the following:

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- **Comprehensive description** of the proposed infrastructure, including full technical and functional specifications, its intended research purposes and areas of application. The proposal should also demonstrate how the investment addresses a strategically important capability gap or will significantly strengthen Ireland's research and innovation capacity.
- **Strategic Relevance and Value-for-Money:**
 - *Institutional role and outputs:* How the investment will strengthen the applicant institution's(s') research capabilities, including in talent development, research excellence and contribution to advancing institutional strategy.
 - *Value-for-money:* how the proposed infrastructure represents value-for-money, including how it does not duplicate existing infrastructures in Ireland, other full proposals under this call and how it leverages Ireland's access to international research facilities.
 - *Pathways to impact* – Evidence of how the infrastructure will enable economic, societal, cultural, or environmental impact, recognising both direct enterprise engagement (e.g. with SMEs/micro-enterprises or industry) and broader contributions such as public policy, community engagement, and cultural enrichment.

- *Policy Alignment*: Clear demonstration of how the investment supports national priorities and policy objectives (e.g. *Impact 2030*, NDP, Action Plan for Competitiveness and Productivity, Climate Action Plan, etc.) as well as relevant sectoral and regional strategies.
- ***Scientific Rationale***:
 - Demonstration that the host institution(s) have the research excellence, expertise, and track record required to utilise the infrastructure effectively and deliver maximum impact.
 - Evidence that the proposed infrastructure is state-of-the-art and internationally competitive.
 - Clear articulation of how the infrastructure will advance research beyond existing capabilities and open new opportunities for discovery, innovation, or interdisciplinary collaboration.
- ***Institutional Collaboration***
 - Full proposals are likely to involve at least two Higher Education Institution partners and demonstrate genuine inter-institutional collaboration, structured to ensure broad system benefit and maximum utilisation of the infrastructure.
 - Collaboration is likely to be required to be based on research excellence, complementarity of expertise, and the potential to deliver national impact – not on formal requirements to include specific institutional types.
 - Proposals should set out equitable access arrangements for all Higher Education Institutions, with clarity on governance, cost-sharing, and user rights.
 - In the case of the applications from the traditional Universities they are encouraged to highlight opportunities for engagement with Technological Universities where relevant and appropriate, recognising the Technological Universities evolving research capacity and the Government’s objective of supporting their development and regional impact.
 - Hosting arrangements should be driven by where the infrastructure can achieve the greatest impact, optimise utilisation, and serve the widest user base.
- ***Access, Engagement, and Data Management***:
 - Details of the prospective user base, across academia, industry (including Micro-Enterprises SMEs), the public sector, and civil society, as relevant to the proposed infrastructure.
 - Plans for promoting and facilitating access for external users, including industry while ensuring full compliance with State Aid rules,
 - A transparent, publicly available access charging framework with a clear point of contact for external users,
 - A comprehensive data management plan.
- ***Management and Sustainability***, including:

- A clear governance, management and operational plan, including inter-institutional arrangements where relevant.
 - A financial sustainability and lifecycle management plan, demonstrating how the infrastructure will be maintained and supported over time,
 - Institutional readiness, including suitability of building, compliance with regulatory requirements, and adequacy of technical and specialist support.
- ***Environmental Responsibility:***
 - A green procurement plan, demonstrating how environmental impact will be minimised during acquisition.
 - Sustainable operational practices (e.g. energy efficiency, Green Lab certification, or equivalent frameworks) to ensure responsible long-term use of the infrastructure,
 - Appropriateness and effectiveness of governance structures and procedures, including financial and risk management, and alignment with Do No Significant Harm and Horizontal Principles.
- ***International Dimension (where relevant):***
 - All-island access to funded infrastructures.
 - Potential to leverage international funding (e.g. Horizon Europe) or contribute to Ireland's visibility and reputation in priority research domains.
 - Opportunities for international collaboration, including access for international researchers, linkages with international facilities, or integration into global research networks.

In line with the overall mission of INSPIRE, the evaluation of full proposals is likely to emphasise three core requirements:

- **Strengthening Ireland's collective research and innovation capacity:** clear contribution to a coherent national system that enhances complementarity, reduces duplication, and builds shared capability across institutions.
- **Strategic partnerships:** the demonstration of genuine, strategic institutional partnerships and associated collaborations, and engagement with relevant user groups; and
- **Maximising utilisation and impact:** credible plans to maximise the utilisation and impact of the infrastructure across all potential user groups – including academia, industry, and the public sector, etc.

Proposals that address these requirements convincingly, and that demonstrate clear strategic importance both to the host institution and to national research and innovation priorities, are likely to be best placed to advance the Programme's objectives and will be prioritised for funding.

Envisaged Phase Two Outcomes:

- **Funding awarded for shared advanced infrastructures** that are hosted by two or more institutions, developed in collaboration with appropriate co-applicants, and made openly and equitably accessible to a broad range of users –Higher Education Institutions, industry, including SMEs, and other external stakeholders.
- Disbursement of institutional allocations towards **maintenance and technical support** for Shared Advanced Infrastructures.

To complement and operationalise these investments, as set out below parallel work will be undertaken to develop a centrally managed national research access portal ensuring that the new shared advanced infrastructures, and existing institutional facilities, are visible and accessible across the system.

6. Development of a National Research Infrastructure Access Portal

A key priority under the INSPIRE Programme will be the development of a national, centralised portal of research infrastructure. This will be developed and centrally managed to provide visibility and accessibility of research infrastructure for all potential users, including other Higher Education Institutions and, importantly, SMEs and enterprise. The portal will enable searches by equipment type and institutional area of expertise, incorporating key details such as access conditions, contact points, and indicative access charges.

It will be critical to maximising the visibility, utilisation, and impact of Ireland's research infrastructure. International models, such as UKRI's Infraportal, demonstrate the value of such platforms in supporting access, transparency, collaboration, and efficient utilisation. The feasibility and benefits of linking the INSPIRE portal with international platforms, such as CatRIS, could also be explored.

The portal will not be limited to new investments under this Programme; a dedicated exercise will also be undertaken to capture and include existing national infrastructure stock. In this way, it will extend beyond shared advanced infrastructure stock to encompass the full range of institutional facilities and equipment, providing a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of available resources and maximising national return on investment. It is also intended to operate beyond the lifetime of this Programme given its ongoing importance to research accessibility and utilisation.

To deliver the system, a small, dedicated team in the responsible agency may be required with guidance from a stakeholder committee managed by the relevant agency with representation from all institution types, core facility managers, enterprise users, and experienced researchers to ensure usability and strategic alignment.

7. Maintenance and Technical Support

The provision of a certain level of support for the maintenance of infrastructure and for associated technical support was identified by the Working Group as a critical success factor in maximising an infrastructure's utilisation and usable lifespan. As part of the INSPIRE Programme, it is intended that time-bound maintenance support will be provided for Local Institutional Infrastructure and maintenance and technical support will be provided for Shared Advanced Infrastructure, in alignment with public spending rules.

It is expected that any technical support funded under this Programme will be made available as appropriate to all categories of users to ensure that infrastructures are effectively and widely utilised. Particular emphasis will be placed on assisting industry users, especially SMEs/ micro-enterprises, to navigate access procedures and make full use of the facilities consistent with State Aid rules, thereby maximising the economic and innovation impact of the investment.

8. Funding Conditions and Post-Award Monitoring

8.1 Main Funding Conditions

In line with international and national good practice, mandatory funding conditions for all awards made under the INSPIRE Programme across all levels will include the delivery of:

- Maximum utilisation of the infrastructure funded to drive value-for-money, with regard to:
 - Intra-institutional usage of local equipment for both teaching and research purposes,
 - Inter-institutional usage of shared equipment,
 - A proportionate level of international access, in keeping with Irish access to similar resources overseas,
 - Industry access, within the parameters of State Aid rules.

And having regard to Shared Advanced Infrastructures:

- A publicly available access charge plan and a clear access point for external users,
- A comprehensive data management plan.
- All shared advanced infrastructures registered and maintained on a central national portal to maximise access and utilisation.
- Comprehensive lifecycle management for all infrastructures and clear governance frameworks in the case of shared infrastructures.
- Appropriate maintenance and technical support to ensure maximum lifespan and utilisation of the infrastructure funded.
- Minimisation of environmental impact, for example, in terms of energy efficiency and renewable energy deployment.
- Clear monitoring and reporting procedures on the part of both the host institution and the Lead Agency.
- Compliance with any relevant State Aid requirements.²

² Note: in the current Research Ireland Research Infrastructure Programme, conditions (see Section 2.3 of the programme call document), regarding State Aids include the following:

- Activities undertaken as part of a grant awarded must be primarily “non-economic” in nature, in accordance with Section 2 of the 2022 Framework for State Aid for research and development and innovation (2022/C414/01).
- Where the recipient institution and any other entity in receipt of grant funding carries out activities of both an economic and non-economic nature, it must have the appropriate accounting separation processes in place.
- Where industry accesses the infrastructure, market rates should apply, and these should be reflected in the access charge plan submitted as part of the funding application.
- Further to this, where industry accesses the funded infrastructure under a contract or rental agreement, these types of commercial activity may only comprise a maximum of 20% of the annual capacity of the funded infrastructure and must also be charged at the full market rate (the “80:20 rule”).

8.2 Institutional Procedures

Each funded institution would be required to put in place robust and transparent procedures to monitor and report to the Lead Agency, using standardised KPIs developed by the agencies and agreed at the Strategic Oversight Group on items such as:

- **Programme funding management and oversight:** including management, oversight and risk management in relation to all funding received under the INSPIRE Programme,
- **Delivery and value for money** – confirmation that equipment has been received, is operational, and represents value-for-money in procurement,
- **Intra-institutional usage**, levels of use across teaching, researcher training and research projects.
- **Inter-institutional usage**, collaboration and shared use with partner institutions across the higher education sectors, and all-island opportunities.
- **Industry access and utilisation**, promotion of facilities to enterprise, industry-uptake supported by programme-funded technical staff and profile of industry users (indigenous or foreign-owned, SME or large-scale).
- **Own resource income policy** of the institution, where appropriate.
- **Maintenance and technical support:** deployment and prioritisation of maintenance budgets; management of equipment lifecycle to maximise lifespan, uptime, and continuity of service.
- **Operational good practices** - having regard, for instance, to:
 - Internal and external accessibility,
 - Minimisation of environmental impact,
 - Open Research and data management,
 - Maintenance and technical staffing arrangements.
- **Impact on institutional strategic priorities**, for example, PhD training, industry collaborations, non-Exchequer and international funding secured.
- **Contribution to national policy objectives**, including Ireland’s competitiveness agenda as set out in *Impact 2030*, the NDP, and the Action Plan for Competitiveness and Productivity.

Timely and complete reporting on the above is likely to be a condition of funding for all monies provided to the institutions under the INSPIRE Programme. As well as ensuring maximum impact and value-for-money, the collection of such data is critical to DFHERIS’ ability to communicate the value of this Programme.

8.3 Agency Oversight and Performance Monitoring

Post-award, using standardised KPIs, the Lead Agency will monitor and ensure:

- **Utilisation of funding and value-for-money achieved** by the institutions in the procurement of equipment,
- **Arrangements for reporting** to it on compliance with the funding conditions and KPIs.

- Ongoing alignment and contribution of all funded infrastructures to ***institutional strategy implementation*** and sectoral contribution to the achievement of national policy objectives and international competitiveness,
- Development and optimisation of the ***central access portal*** referenced above for all shared advanced infrastructures.