# EPIC Futures NI- Phase 2
# Guidance on the Governance and Management of Grants

**EPIC Futures NI Funding Context**

EPIC Futures NI is a Local Policy Partnership (LPIP) hub, led by Ulster University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Innovate UK.

EPIC Futures NI has been allocated £4.8 million to help reduce regional disparities in economic, social, and environmental challenges faced by local communities.

EPIC Futures NI aims to contribute towards a prosperous and sustainable future for Northern Ireland. With a 'place-based' focus the partnership brings together academia, policy makers, business, community, and voluntary sector to jointly co-design policy and programmes that will help improve equitable access to skills and employment opportunities. Together, we aim to create evidence-based solutions to fair and inclusive employment across Northern Ireland.

£1 million has been allocated to the EPIC Futures Policy Commissioning Fund. The call will be managed in two phases.

**Phase 1.** Funding of up to £30,000 was awarded to nine successful organisations in the phase one pilot from a budget of £250,000. These projects will be completed by November 2025.

**Phase 2.** This funding award will range from £10,000 to £100,000 from a budget of £750k. Small awards of up to £30,000 must be completed by June 2026. Large awards of £30,001 up to £100k must be completed by September 2026.

**Governance Standards and Principles**

Ulster University (Ulster) works to the purpose and principles of **The Government Functional Standards on Grants**. Ulster is not a government department, arms-length body, or public sector body for which these standards usually apply. However, the purpose and principles will be upheld as set out in this guidance.

**Purpose:**

*"The purpose............is to set expectations for the management of grants, and to promote efficient and effective grant making to ensure funding is used as intended and provides value for money through high quality delivery."*

**Principles:**

*"Those engaged in managing grants at scheme and award level shall ensure:*
*1. grants objectives are aligned to government policy and organisational objectives.*

*2. the application of this standard is proportionate and appropriate, and is reflected in the approach taken to governance, management frameworks and controls, having regard to an accepted balance of opportunity and risk.*

*3. grants are made in the best interest of the public, the public purse, and operate in line with 'Managing Public Money'.*

*4. funding is administered with optimum efficiency, economy, effectiveness, and prudence, to maximise value for public money.*

*5. responsibilities and accountabilities are defined, mutually consistent, and traceable across all levels of management; and*

*6. public service codes of conduct and ethics and those of associated professions are upheld."*

**Ulster University Processes for Managing Public Money**

Ulster University has robust systems and processes for managing public money and following grant funding rules. Due diligence will be upheld in the administration and distribution of the funding.

Ulster University has an approved process for reviewing and awarding grants and will follow the established governance policies, systems and processes to ensure decisions and payments are approved by authorised persons, awarded and managed efficiently.

Applications will be invited through an open commissioning call process ('call' or 'the call') with details and online form accessible on the EPIC Futures Website https://www.epicfuturesni.org

**Authorisation and decision making**

- Applications will be submitted using the online form in the funding section at https://www.epicfuturesni.org
  - All supporting documentation should be attached to the application by the closing date, or the application will be considered ineligible.
- A five-stage process will be adopted.
  - Stage 1. Eligibility Screening based on eligibility criteria/questions.
    - Ulster University EPIC Futures Team
  - Stage 2. Scored independent assessment (see Appendix 1)
    - 1 policy expert and 1 academic
  - Stage 3. Moderation between assessors
    - Where assessor scores are within ten marks, an average score will be allocated to the project. Where assessor scores are outside the ten-mark limit, the assessors must communicate via email and video call to agree a final consolidated score.
    - In instances where a score cannot be agreed a third independent assessor will score the application and the decision will rest with the independent assessor.
  - Stage 4. Reviewer panel assessment

- Department for Communities (DfC), Department for the Economy (DfE), policy experts, academic co-investigators and supporting academic researchers linked to EPIC Futures NI
  - Stage 5. Portfolio Review and Balance
    - EPIC Futures Principal Investigator and academic co-investigators will review the EPIC Futures portfolio to assess strategic fit and duplication.
- Considerations of equality, diversity, inclusion and environmental sustainability are an important element within all applications and will be assessed within the criteria set out below.
- Reviewers will also consider the appropriateness of costs sought and value for money of projects.

**Scoring Criteria**

| Criteria | Explanation | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Relevance to policy and practice related to employability and skills** | Identification of a clear need for the proposal in terms of how it will advance knowledge and practice within the employability, skills and labour market landscape in Northern Ireland (NI). <br> Demonstrate evidence on how the proposal will have relevance to wider UK, and/or Cross Border key policy agendas (if relevant). <br> Clarity on how learnings from other countries can inform policy and practice in Northern Ireland (if relevant). <br> There must be a clear explanation of how the findings or outputs will demonstrate novelty and provide value for Northern Ireland stakeholders with policy responsibilities and/or contribute to strengthening policy implementation in practice. | 40% |
| **Approach and methodology** | Clear aim/objectives/research questions. Alignment or proposal to EPIC Futures NI and theme(s) being addressed. <br> Identification of context and knowledge gaps. A clear overview of the approach being taken on the project and steps involved. <br> A detailed discussion of the proposed methodology. Depending on the type of proposal, this should include the data being used/collected, sampling, quantity of data being collected and clarity over how data will be accessed in time frames. <br> Data management plan and research ethics approval processes (if applicable). <br> Engagement and dissemination plans (if applicable). <br> Clearly stated outputs, outcomes and impact. Clear timelines for delivery. | 40% |

| Lead/Team, experience and collaboration | Outline how the skills and experience of the Lead/Team align with the proposed project.<br>Outline team composition and responsibilities.<br>Demonstrate ability to develop policy orientated knowledge and outputs.<br>Demonstrate track record of collaboration.<br>Outline the recruitment process for any new team members to be hired to ensure it will be within the timeframe of the project (if applicable)<br>Capacity to deliver (particularly if applying for multiple projects). | 20% |
| --- | --- | --- |

- Applicants will identify if they are a research-led or partner-led application. UKRI is the primary funder and has different rules depending on whether the lead organisation is a UKRI-recognised research organisation (such as a university) or a non-research organisation (such as Independent Research Organisations, UK Businesses, Community and Voluntary Sector and Government). Research organisations are defined using UKRI guideline Research organisations eligible for UKRI funding – UKRI.

- The distinctions between research-led and partner-led applications will be considered based on Pg. 26–29 of the EPIC Futures NI Phase 2 Policy Commissioning Call Guidance.

- For Route 1 Open Call, applications which pass eligibility checks and score over a minimum threshold will be recommended for funding under the appropriate award category. For small awards, funding will be awarded up to a maximum of £30,000 per project, until the £160,000 funding pot is allocated[1]. For large awards, funding will be allocated between £30,001 - £100,000 up until the £320,000 is awarded. For Route 2 Policy Priority Projects, there is a maximum budget of £270,000 and one project in each of the 5 topics will be awarded up to the maximum thresholds stated for each project, providing they meet eligibility checks and are of appropriate quality to meet the outcomes sought.

- If the full funding pot for any of the routes or award categories are not allocated due to not enough projects meeting the threshold, quality or feasibility within timeframes, funding may be moved across categories until the full £750,000 is allocated.

- In instances where scores align and funding is limited; projects may be partially funded. This decision will rest with the assessment panel.

- The panel may request minor changes to the methods or scope (if relevant) which if offered funding, would be a condition of acceptance.

- Due diligence will be carried out by Ulster University following good practice guidelines and standards as part of the eligibility, evaluation, and pre-award process. This will include but is not limited to.
    - Company House checks

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[1] Your proposal could score over the threshold but due to other projects scoring higher and the allocations of funds, it may not get funded.

- Policy and document checks
- Audited accounts (where appropriate)
- Conflict of Interest
- Appendix 2. Sets out the approach to Due Diligence (proportionate to funding)

- Successful applicants will be notified of a successful award through a Grant Award Letter of Offer (LoO)
- A Grant Funding Agreement will be issued to the Lead Applicant outlining the value of the award, contract terms and conditions and mandatory paperwork to be returned e.g. confirmation of acceptance.
- Under current restrictions, no procurement, commercial, business development or supply chain activity with any Russian or Belarusian entity as lead, partner or subcontractor will be funded. This includes any goods or services originating from a Russian or Belarusian source.

**Managing Grants**

- Grants will be awarded to one Lead UK based applicant (academics / researchers / organisations). The fund encourages Cross Border Collaboration (Island of Ireland) and with those in other countries (particularly areas where policy is set by devolved institutions) for the specific purposes outlined in the EPIC Futures Policy Commissioning Call Guidance.
- The grant recipient will be issued with a Grant Funding Agreement outlining contract terms and conditions and defined purpose of the grant.
- The grant recipient will ensure that delivery of the funded activities does not put the University in breach of the UK's domestic or international obligations defined under the Subsidy Control Act and complete necessary Subsidy control reporting. This includes any community and voluntary sector organisation which is engaged in economic activity. Where it is deemed that a Subsidy has been given the costs awarded to the organisation will be in line with the primary funder costing rules governing business organisations.
- The grant recipient will be set up as a New Supplier to Ulster University for the purpose of grant payment. Ulster University's Finance Department will verify New Supplier details directly with the grant recipient.
- On completion of Ulster University's New Supplier procedures, which includes fraud prevention controls, a purchase order will be raised, ensuring the correct authorisation process is followed in accordance with Ulster University's financial procedures.
- Authorisation processes and procedures have been agreed with Ulster University's Finance and Procurement Departments in line with Ulster University's Procurement Policy. Purchase order approval is strictly controlled within the Ulster University finance system.
- Grant changes will be managed by Ulster as and when required.

- A maximum amount of £100,000 can be applied for in Phase 2 from a £750k allocation, however, please refer to the different funding routes as outlined in the call specification which have different categories of awards and maximum limits for certain types of applications.
- Claims Process (see Appendix 3 and 4)
    - All claims will be paid quarterly in arrears in line with your project start/ end date upon successful completion of project milestones as verified by a member of the EPIC Futures NI Team.
    - Grant recipient will submit an invoice along with statement of expenditure and supporting evidence to the EPIC Futures NI Team.
    - Claim notification, confirmation of project process and management approval will take place.
    - Eligible costs must follow the UKRI Research Funding Guide (updated June 2025). Only eligible costs can be claimed.
    - EPIC Futures Team submits invoice to payments@ulster.ac.uk
    - All documents will be retained in line with Subsidy Control laws and document retention requirements.
    - Once all verifications are complete, the EPIC Futures NI Team will confirm as 'goods received.'
    - Payments are processed by Ulster University's finance team and payment timeframes cannot be guaranteed.
    - If any part of the claim is disputed, the project team will work with the organisation to resolve the matter.
- Suspending or terminating a grant award
    - If an organisation is deemed by Ulster to be ineligible to receive funding, Ulster may withdraw the organisation's grant.
    - In this case Ulster will issue a letter to the organisation confirming the termination of the grant.
- Clawback – the process has been designed to minimise the risk of funding being clawed back. However, the terms and conditions included with the Grant Funding Agreement make provision for Ulster to clawback funding if the organisation provides incomplete, false, or misleading information.
- Any termination or clawback values which can be safely reallocated to other applicants, will be considered by the Co-directors and Principal Investigator for approval.

**Assurance and Ulster's Project Monitoring**

- All monitoring will be consistent with requirements of the Grant Funding Agreement.
- Grant monitoring will take place throughout the scheme.
    - Named grant recipients.
    - Value of grants awarded.
    - Value of staged payments.

- Value of payments requested and completed.
- Milestones reached within delivery timeframes.

- This information will be reported to the EPIC Futures NI Co-Director team and project funder quarterly and on an annual basis, in line with reporting requirements.
- Any proposals for corrective action will be assessed by the EPIC Futures Team in the first instance and communicated with the relevant departments and grant recipients.
- All approvals and amendments will be recorded.
- An EPIC Futures NI risk register is in place and will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. Risks will be escalated as and when required, in line with Ulster University's standard practice for managing risk.
- The project will be carried out in accordance with all applicable ethical, legal, and regulatory requirements including but not limited to relevant provisions of the Data Protection Act 2018, the Bribery Act 2010, the Fraud Act 2006, the Equality Act 2010, and the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and in compliance with the terms of the Grant Funding Agreement.

**Subsidy Control**

- Grants are made under the Subsidy Control Act 2022 (legislation.gov.uk) .
- At pre-award stage organisations are asked to declare and detail whether they have the capacity to receive the funding within the limits for Minimal Financial Assistance or De Minimis aid, whichever is applicable.
- The organisation is required to return a detailed declaration stating how much subsidy they and their group have received within the past 3 years.
- There is clear provision setting out the organisations responsibility to declare its compliance in the terms and conditions.

**Project Reporting and Evaluation**

All proposals should have clearly defined outputs and a timeline for deliverables. Funded projects in Phase 2 will be expected to:

- Have bi-monthly meetings with a member of EPIC Futures NI to discuss progress.

- Provide an interim update in the form of a short report and a 10-minute presentation to the EPIC Futures NI co-director team.

- Present findings at the EPIC Futures Commissioning Call Policy Conference which will take place end of October/Start of November 2026.

- Provide a final report of findings by July 2026 (small projects) and October 2026 (large projects). Small projects conducting research with vulnerable groups can request an extended delivery timeframe to accommodate the longer ethical approval process as outlined in the call guidance.

- Engage with the EPIC Futures NI team yearly (during February each year), to share any further developments and impact of the funding.
- Agree to the UKRI terms and conditions to report to the funder for five years after the funding award.

**Supporting Practices**

- Counter Fraud
    - To eliminate fraud, Ulster University has implemented proportionate due diligence and stipulated that a valid invoice is required for payment. Grant awards can only be used for the purposes specified in the Grant Funding Agreement. These steps are in line with Ulster University's standard financial management policies and procedures.

- Grant Making Capability and Resources
    - The funding will be distributed through two calls to ensure sufficient awarding and delivery by project end.
    - Applications will be received and reviewed through two grant calls.
        - **Phase 1.** Funding of up to £30,000 was awarded to nine successful organisations in the phase one pilot from a budget of £250,000. These projects will be completed by November 2025.
        - **Phase 2.** Funding awards ranging from £10,000 to £100,000 are available for phase two from a budget of £750k. Small awards of up to £30,000 must be completed by 30th June 2026. Large awards of up to £100k must be completed by 30th September 2026. The call will open in August 2026 and close on 9th September 2026.
    - A dedicated project team is responsible for scoring applications with relevant expertise in research, policy, skills, and economy to review grant applications and manage the grant awards system.
    - Separation of duties are outlined in appendix 5.

- Agreements
    - The grant recipient will be issued with a Grant Funding Agreement outlining contract terms and conditions and defined purpose of the grant.
    - The grant recipient will ensure that delivery of the funded activities does not put Ulster University in breach of the UK's domestic or international obligations defined under the Subsidy Control Act and complete necessary Subsidy control reporting.
    - On receipt of grant acceptance, Ulster University's Finance Department will validate New Supplier details, including fraud prevention control documentation, directly with the grant recipient.

- Performance Monitoring
    - Projects funded are expected to engage with the wider EPIC Futures programme activities and report their progress and outcomes to Ulster University.
    - Project monitoring will be commensurate with the level of grant, milestones, and timeline.
    - Progress reports will be requested depending on the level of funding sought and project duration. All reporting and evaluation requirements will be detailed in the Grant Funding Agreement.

- Document Management and Record Keeping
    - The project documents will be retained in line with the University's Retention and Disposal Schedule: Records Retention and Disposal Schedule.

- Reporting and Information
    - A record of the grants issued, invoices and supporting documentation received, subsidy control provisions and data regarding the beneficiaries and their projects will be collected and retained.

- Continuous Learning and Improvement
    - The governance and management process implemented for this project builds on Ulster University's experience and knowledge of receiving and administering grant funding. Post project evaluation will be carried out to ensure lessons learnt are carried forward and incorporated into best practice.

**Appendix 1. Assessment Panel**

a. **Role of the Assessment Panel**
The purpose of the Assessment Panel is to consider and reach final agreement on the grading, ranking, and funding of proposals and, where necessary, to agree broad feedback for applicants. In instances when the number of proposals submitted are extremely high, assessment timelines may be extended, and feedback is not guaranteed.

b. **Membership**
The Assessment Panel will be made up of external experts with the relevant experience and expertise in policy, research, and academia. This includes, Department for Communities (DfC), Department for the Economy (DfE) policy experts, academic co-investigators and supporting researchers linked to EPIC Futures NI

The quorate for the Assessment Panel will be two academics and two policy experts.

The Assessment Panel will meet remotely via video conference OR in-person (dependant on panel member availability) for application assessment when a quorum is met.

c. **The Role of the Chair**
The Assessment Panel will be chaired by either the Principal Investigator or one of the co-directors on EPIC Futures NI. For information, the role of the Chair is:

- to have read and familiarised themselves with all applications and technical review scoring.
- to oversee and to run the Assessment Panel meeting
- to set the context and tone for the meeting in terms of process and methods of working
- to ensure that the meeting keeps to time.
- to rank those proposals in the funding range with a final score
- to seek clarification of the panel's views and to ensure there is appropriate discussion before agreement on what projects are recommended for funding.
- to ensure that all procedures and protocols are followed, including funder requirements and to refer to EPIC Futures team for guidance when necessary.
- to summarise final approvals and conditions on awards and propose resubmissions where necessary.

d. **The Role of Assessment Panel Members.** For information, the role of the Assessment Panel member is:
- to have familiarised themselves with the guidelines and assessment criteria for the Call.
- to have alerted the Chair to any conflicts of interest they may have.
- to assess the applications and submit their scores.

If relevant,
- to attend the panel meeting to agree final rankings for all proposals.
- to agree any feedback where applicable.

In undertaking the tasks, panellists are expected to:
- exercise their knowledge, judgement, and expertise to reach clear, sound, evidence-based decisions.
- always treat all applications as strictly confidential.
- panel members should not allow any private knowledge of the applicant or the proposed project, to influence their judgement.

### e.  Frequency of Meetings

Frequency of meetings will depend on the volume of applications. It is expected that the Assessment Panel will meet within six weeks of Call closing date to review and assess applications. We will seek to ensure applications are considered in a timely manner.

### f.  Conflicts of Interest

It is vital that panel members are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process. Assessment panel members (including the Chair) should not therefore take part in the assessment of any proposal where a conflict of interest could be construed. All assessment panel members must declare any conflict of interest regarding applications that are being considered. If anyone has a conflict of interest with a proposal, s/he will be required to leave the room whilst the proposal is being discussed.

**Appendix 2. Due Diligence:**

UKRI Due Diligence Questionnaire will be issued to grant awardees for competition.

| | Small Grants and Policy Priority awards – to the Grant Value to £30k | Large Grants and Policy Priority awards – to the Grant Value of £100k | Mechanism for check |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Active company** – registered in the UK | ✓ | ✓ | Companies House Charity Commission Register |
| No disqualified directors | ✓ | ✓ | Successful applicants will be asked to declare that there are no disqualified directors (where applicable). |
| Politically exposed people (PEP) and sanction flags | ✓ | ✓ | Successful applicants will be asked to declare that no person with controlling interest has Russian or Belorussian citizenship. |
| **Accounts** - late filing OR financial concerns | ✓ | ✓ | Successful applicants will be required to submit accounts / financial statement (where applicable). |
| **Viability checks** | Declaration of Ability to fund first claim period and their ongoing contribution – for the duration of the project. | Analysis of filed accounts – Net worth, profitability etc. Review of cash flow to cover the first quarter and ongoing contribution for the project OR letter of support showing investment from third party. | Applicants will be asked to declare that they have the cash flow to claim quarterly in arrears. |

**Appendix 3. EPIC Futures NI Commissioning Call. Grant Application and Payments Process**

**EPIC Futures NI Application Form**
- Organisation, project, and eligibility criteria complete (lead applicant in UK, ability to claim in arrears, ethics at academic institution, conflict of interest).
- Declaration of meeting all eligible criteria set out in guidance (additional due diligence to be completed pre-award).
- Form submitted with supporting documents in advance of the closing dates.

**Eligibility Screen & Assessment**
- Pass/ fail based on review of the eligibility questions in the online form.
- Review and scoring of application (independent score, moderation, portfolio balance, assessment panel).
- Confirmation that project meets threshold minimum score.
- Grant application approved/ rejected by reviewer panel and shortlist created.

**Conditional Letter of Offer (LoO), Due Diligence and Financial Setup**
- Conditional Letter of Offer (LoO) awarded with paperwork to complete Due Diligence Checks.
- Grants awarded until £750k pot is allocated (partial funding where decided).
- List of successful awards provided to the funder and EPIC Futures governance structures.
- New supplier forms issued when Due Diligence checks are complete.

**Grant Award and Project Initiation Phase**
- Grant Funding Agreement Issued and returned with appropriate signatures.
- Signed subsidy control declaration submitted.
- Grant recipient setup as a new supplier on Ulster University Procurement System.
- Ulster University new supplier checks are complete.
- Project Initiation Meeting (PIM) complete and milestones documentation signed off.

**Purchase Order (PO) and financial monitoring.**
- Funding details added to the grants record showing applicant, value, payment dates and milestones.
- Supplier number activated.
- University Ulster raise Purchase Order (PO) for total grant amount.
- Purchase Order (PO) number generated and recorded until approval completed.

**Claim and payment.**

- Grant awardee completes reporting requirements to demonstrate progress in line with milestones identified.
- Appointed person reviews evidence and confirms payment requirements have been met. Management approval is secured.
- Invoice quoting Purchase Order Reference number submitted by grant awardee to EPICFutures@ulster.ac.uk for processing within the Ulster University procedures.
- Confirmation of goods received, and payment made by finance in line with staged payment amount to a maximum on the Purchase Order.

**Appendix 4.**

**Claims Procedure Table for Phase 1.**

| Claim Procedure | Phase 2 Small Grant Awards. Up to £30,000 | Phase 2 Large Award. £30,001-£100,000. |
|---|---|---|
| Statement of Expenditure, including eligible costs incurred and settled, signed by a director of the named Lead Applicant. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Claim reviewed to ensure consistency with costs approved in Open Call Grant Agreement. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Claim reviewed to ensure that costs are eligible and incurred and paid after the start date and before the end date of the project. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Milestones and reporting log with supporting documentation reviewed commensurate with level of funding. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Review of work completion or satisfactory progress by nominated member of EPIC Futures NI Team. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Claim approved. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Purchase order number forwarded to grant recipient. | ✓ | ✓ |
| Grant recipient submits invoice to include PO reference number. | ✓ | ✓ |

**Appendix 5. Separation of Duties**

| Stage / process | Principal Investigator and Co-investigators | Assessment Panel Representatives | Ulster University Business School & EPIC Futures NI Team |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Application** | Lead online information session.<br><br>Provide guidance on application process. | | Monitor number of applications.<br><br>Coordinate targeted publicity in line with requirements. |
| **Initial Assessment to confirm eligibility.** | | | Record and confirm to Assessment Panel that eligibility requirements are met including Conflict of interest. |
| **Assessment Panel** | Appoint the assessment panel and allocate applications based on area of expertise. | | Send applications to assessment panel.<br><br>Set up review meetings. |
| **Review** | | Review application against scoring criteria.<br><br>Ensure application is feasible.<br><br>Review financial information, including confirmation that costs are necessary and appropriate.<br><br>Confirm achievability of project milestones and outputs.<br><br>Record scores. | Record consensus scores/ decisions. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Due Diligence** | | | Company and financial checks.<br><br>Subsidy Control. |
| **Award** | Approval process & inform funder. | | |
| **Notification to Applicant** | | | Issue Letter of Offer (LoO).<br><br>Issue Grant Funding Agreement.<br><br>Ulster Finance Dept. notified of new supplier. |
| **Post award monitoring** | Appoint representatives to provide feedback on progress.<br><br>Project updates included in quarterly reports. | Any technical guidance from assessment panel included in reporting and monitoring schedule. | Review of subsidy control declarations.<br><br>Project management and monitoring – monthly meetings/ quarterly and end of project reporting.<br><br>Budget vs spends monitoring.<br><br>Review interim statements of expenditure. |
| **Project completion** | Review end of project report (milestones and outputs).<br><br>Monitor project impact and follow on activity. | | Confirm project outputs have been achieved.<br><br>Initiate final payment via Ulster Finance systems.<br><br>Update project paperwork and financial monitoring. |