

Understanding the UKRI Research Councils

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is the UK’s funding agency for research and innovation, covering all major academic fields from engineering and physics to humanities and the arts. In the life sciences sector, funding is primarily delivered through the Medical Research Council, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, and Innovate UK to deliver solutions that improve patient outcomes, social care services, and population health.

Funding opportunities are available throughout the year, with councils offering both ‘rolling deadline’ researcher-led grants and strategically targeted calls, including fellowships, infrastructure funding, and themed research programmes. These targeted opportunities are typically developed in response to specific research and innovation priorities.

This guide provides an overview of the UKRI research councils most relevant to life sciences, highlighting their research priorities and funding focus to help you identify the most suitable funding route for your project.

Research Council	Focus
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)	BBSRC supports studies that improve our understanding of living systems and the biological processes that underpin human and animal health. Funding spans areas such as molecular and cellular biology, healthy ageing, nutrition, and biotechnology.
Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)	ESRC is the UK's largest funder of social science research. It supports studies that help us understand people, behaviour, and society, including health inequalities, social care, health economics, population health, and improving the delivery of health and care services.
Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)	EPSRC is the UK's main funder of engineering and physical sciences research, supporting technologies such as medical devices, AI, digital health, imaging, and data-driven innovations for healthcare.
Innovate UK	Innovate UK (IUK) is the UK's national innovation agency, supporting businesses to develop and commercialise new technologies, products, and services. Within health and life sciences, it funds innovations such as medical devices, diagnostics, digital health technologies, and healthcare solutions with the potential for real-world impact.
Medical Research Council (MRC)	MRC is the UK's main public funder of medical research. It supports studies that improve our understanding of human health and disease, helping to develop new treatments, medicines, diagnostics, and interventions that can prevent illness and improve patient outcomes.
Science and Technology Facilities Research Council (STFC)	STFC supports research in advanced technologies, data science, computing, and specialist research facilities. Within health and life sciences, this includes areas such as medical imaging, digital health, health data analytics, and research infrastructure.