



Cancer Grand Challenges Introductory Webinar Transcript

22 May, 2023

Tony Dickherber 0:01

Okay, welcome everyone to our pre application informational webinar for the Cancer Grand Challenges programme, a Cancer Research Initiative being jointly led by the US National Cancer Institute and Cancer Research UK. You should all know that our presentation should last about 20 minutes after which we'll answer any questions you have. And I should note that this webinar will not delve into the scientific scope of the published challenges. It's meant to cover the general process associated with the initiative and how to access available resources to help you assemble applications. Please submit any questions through the chat window and we'll do our best to address as many of them as we can in the time that we have allotted for this. The presentation is being recorded and it will be posted on the Cancer Grand Challenges website.

Tony Dickherber 0:44

So I'm Tony Dickherber, representing the National Cancer Institute. And I'll be going through the first half of our presentation and I'm joined by Laurie Dudley who is representing Cancer Research UK and he'll give the latter half of our presentation. I'll start by running through the topics we intend to cover today.

Tony Dickherber 1:00

We'll begin with an overview of the initiative and what our two organisations hope to achieve through this collaborative programme. Then we'll talk about what's unique about this particular funding opportunity compared to how NCI and CRUK normally support research. We'll walk through the process of how the challenges are determined and developed insofar as that provides helpful context and considering suitable responses through your applications. And from there, we'll describe the application process and how these applications will be reviewed. And finally, some administrative and programmatic details about the issuance of awards and how they're managed. As I already mentioned, you are invited to submit any questions you have via the chat window and at any time during the presentation. And we'll do our best to get to all of them after the presentation. But if you take nothing else from this webinar, please feel very much encouraged to reach out to the programme team with any questions whatsoever at that email address at the bottom of the screen, which is info@cancergrandchallenges.org.



Tony Dickherber 1:56

So the reason that the two largest cancer research funding agencies in the world came together through this initiative is our mutual recognition that there exists critical challenges in making progress against cancer, which we expect could and should be going much faster. This is the second round of Cancer Grand Challenges that NCI and CRUK have engaged in as partners. But the programme is built upon two prior rounds of its predecessor, the Grand Challenges initiative led by CRUK, which convinced both of us this is an effective approach for attacking such challenges. The challenges are determined through extensive engagement with the research community and people affected by cancer, through workshops and online forum and other means to identify candidate challenges. But we offer the following framework,

Tony Dickherber 2:40

which includes an audacious award sum that's specifically intended to remove restricted thinking based on limited available resources. Second, is a two-stage review process overseen by the same scientific committee that established the scope of the challenges, and recognising the complexity and burden of pulling together the kinds of proposals we're looking for. We provide 30,000 pounds in seed funding for those that reach the second stage of this process. Next is recognition that expertise and ideas are not well integrated across the globe. And we anticipate great potential by virtue of disrupting geographical silos and seeing significant international collaboration around selective challenges. Similarly, we expect that competitive teams are bringing together not only the diversity of skill sets that facilitate innovative approaches, but also the diversity of perspectives those fields might introduce in evaluating these challenges. And finally, we expect teams feature significant roles for patient advocates, underscoring an appreciation for the transformative potential the work represents for advancing cancer research and maintaining an eye on how progress can be translated into clinical outcomes. So, given this framework, I think it's important for applicants to understand how challenges are determined. What I'm providing here on the slide are the instructions we offer to those that contribute candidate challenges for the scientific committee to consider.

Tony Dickherber 4:02

The scope of each challenge is designed to elicit responses that propose to overcome known barriers and capitalise on recognised opportunities. Note that the guidance for those contributing topics is that a big question is that a big question doesn't necessarily mean that it's better suited for CGC. Small questions can be equally good but importantly, the challenge should require responses that lead to answers that are likely to be transformative in the cancer research landscape. And the challenges have to be suitable to the framework I outlined in the previous slide. So they must be framed in a way that's accessible and meaningful to a wide range of researchers across a variety of disciplines, as we're looking to encourage novel thinking and approaches and only made possible by the level of investment up to 20 million pounds over five years by an international team-based approach.



Tony Dickherber 4:51

As I indicated earlier, the scientific committee participates in the full process of this initiative which is itself unique. They consider the diversity of submitted candidate challenges and work to develop the scope of each final challenge area to fit the unique framework of CGC that I offered in the previous slide. And they serve as the review panel that assesses both stages of application. And they stay involved in monitoring progress each year, offering guidance and feedback of course through each of these steps. More information on each of these individuals is available on the Grand Challenges website listed at the bottom of the screen. So let me lay out the timeline. I indicated earlier that the overall process begins with extensive engagement with researchers and people affected by cancer around the world to identify potential challenges. And the Scientific Committee met earlier this year to converge on the nine challenges around which we published our invitation for applications in March. The first step in responding to a challenge is the submission of expressions of interest, which are due on the 22nd of June this year, we'll provide a bit more detail on that later, but this is meant to be a relatively short submission with the overall research strategy being summarised in about three to four pages. The Scientific Committee will review submissions and they'll identify 10 to 12 finalists by late July that will be invited to submit full applications. At this point finalists received the 30,000 pounds I mentioned earlier in seed funding to support the development of their full applications, which are to be submitted by late October. So these funds are meant to support travel for the participants to fully develop their research strategy and to recruit project management support to assist in managing the effort. Please note that all finalist teams will need to bring together key personnel from each institution that hopes to receive an award for orientation around the unique aspects of this type of award, since it will be distinct from standard NCI and CRUK practices including the management of intellectual property.

Tony Dickherber 6:47

Finalist teams will be invited for an interview which will occur in mid-December in London in the UK, up to four teams will be selected and notified by early 2024. With teams receiving 50% of their award from CRUK and 50% of their award from NCI, with regards to the direct cost of the award. Standard NCI and CRUK funding practices, including coverage of indirect costs are largely in effect for the award monies received from CRUK and NCI. I want to say that while 20 million pounds is meant to serve as an attractive incentive that makes all of this effort worthwhile, I also want to point out that the value of receiving an award goes beyond just the funds. I think it's really important to highlight the rich interactions that you'll have available to you as an awardee invited to participate in the annual summit, and through other opportunity opportunities like annual meetings for the future leaders in cancer research and other programme events. I also want to underscore that, especially for those of you used to US government funding from the NIH, the nature of these awards we're using for this initiative has the kind of flexibility that allows more freedom to pursue opportunities that emerge along the way, which would have been difficult to account for in the scope of the project aims which you laid out at the submission of your application to NIH at the outset.



Tony Dickherber 8:01

And I finally want to highlight something that I mentioned previously in this presentation, which is the ongoing participation of the scientific committee and monitoring and offering guidance through the lifetime of the award, which is truly unique, and I think a very important benefit beyond the availability of the resources to pursue the work.

Tony Dickherber 8:19

As you likely all already know, there are nine challenges that are currently open to the community. I don't intend to go into depth on these during this presentation as that would take too long, and it would be much better for you to learn about the scope of each challenge by reading about them on the Cancer Grand Challenges website listed at the bottom of the slide. You'll find fairly significant details for the scope of each challenge there,

Tony Dickherber 8:45

including videos from the members of the scientific committee, or from the scientific director of CGC about each of these challenges, where they attempt to emphasise from their own perspective, what they view as the exciting opportunities and array of challenges within the scope of any specific challenge. Those can be found by navigating to the challenge videos as shown on the slide and I invite you to view those to gather some insights into the views of the people that will repeat that we'll be reviewing your applications. Again, you should be able to find sufficient details for the scope of each challenge on the website. But I again want to encourage you to reach out early and often to the programme team for any questions whatsoever at the email address that I mentioned before, which is info@cancergrandchallenges.org. At this point, I'd like to hand this to Laurie to discuss the applications process and expectations.

Laurie Dudley 9:32

Thank you, Tony. And yeah, as Tony said, I'm Laurie Dudley. I'm part of the Cancer Grand Challenges team at Cancer Research UK, it's a pleasure to speak to you. And I'm just going to start off with a little bit about what makes for a competitive Cancer Grand Challenges team.

Laurie Dudley 9:49

So there are lots of important considerations that prospective applicants will want to take into account when building their teams. And there is no one size fits all for what a competitive team will look like.



Laurie Dudley 10:00

As you probably know, a Cancer Grand Challenges team comprises one team lead, with multiple co-investigators based at multiple research institutions. Co-investigators will all contribute to the scientific direction and development of the research and provide significant intellectual input. The team lead is responsible for the overall scientific direction of the research programme. And we have had a lot of questions about the inclusion of multiple team leads, and we'd like to stress that we strongly encourage teams to include only one team lead. In our experience over three rounds of the initiative, it is preferable for a single leader to head up each Consortium, and the scientific committee will be carefully considering the leadership of each team when it shortlists expressions of interest.

Laurie Dudley 10:48

Funded teams must also incorporate a programme manager and one or more appropriate patient advocates, and may well also bring on board collaborators who will assist with the research but not make significant intellectual contributions. At this stage, you'll probably be wanting to spend most time considering which investigators you want on your team. So that's what we'll concentrate on here.

Laurie Dudley 11:11

Fundamentally, we're looking for the best teams with the best ideas to address the challenges. But we have had some questions about what "good" looks like, and so we thought it might be useful to highlight some areas to think about. So first, on the slide new and unusual collaborations. So we want to see evidence that applicants have actively sought out new perhaps unusual collaborations that will bring fresh thinking to the challenge ideas. While of course teams will want to build on existing and well-established connections, we hope that the global and interdisciplinary scope of the Cancer Grand Challenges awards will encourage you to think outside the box and approach colleagues from totally different scientific worlds.

Laurie Dudley 11:50

In terms of international teams, one of the few hard and fast rules of Cancer Grand Challenges funding is that no more than 70% of the research activity, and therefore allocated funding, can be based in a single country. We've set this rule to ensure that teams really embrace the international nature of the initiative, and draw on expertise from across the globe.

Laurie Dudley 12:10

As you know, Cancer Grand Challenges is enabled through a partnership between Cancer Research UK and the US National Cancer Institute. It's really important to stress however, that there is no requirement for teams to include researchers in either the UK or the US. Our scientific committee will



be asked to assess which teams have the greatest potential to address the challenge they're tackling, irrespective of geography.

Laurie Dudley 12:33

Interdisciplinarity. So the challenges that we've set require multiple ways of thinking, and therefore teams must include investigators from a range of disciplines working collaboratively and interdependently. We welcome applicants with expertise in the biomedical sciences, software development and Technology, Engineering and Physical Sciences, behavioural, health, population and social sciences, and many more besides, including non-traditional disciplines is encouraged both to drive the development of novel technologies or methodologies, and to incorporate thinking from other fields that has not yet been applied to cancer. In this area, we're really expecting teams to surprise us with the innovative ways they apply their expertise to these Cancer Grand Challenges.

Laurie Dudley 13:18

Fourth, size management and governance. It is really important for teams to think about how they will manage and organise in the event they are funded. Appropriate management and governance structures will need to be detailed at the full application stage. However, at EOI stage, it is worth thinking about how you might coordinate the research effort across a global team. And this will probably inform how many investigators you consider bringing onto the team. There's no set limit, but we strongly discourage teams with more than 10 investigators because this will mean CO-Is receive significant funding to contribute to the Cancer Grand Challenges effort.

Laurie Dudley 13:56

To reiterate, we expect to see expressions of interest with only one team lead, the team lead will be asked to form the management group to support them in overseeing the scientific direction and development of the research.

Laurie Dudley 14:07

Diversity. It's very important to us that teams strive to achieve true diversity in their team makeup, be that in terms of academic background and experience, or in terms of personal characteristics, such as sex, and ethnicity. And we're particularly interested to see teams that include investigators who are in the early stage of establishing their independent careers.



Laurie Dudley 14:28

Quick word on training. An important pillar of Cancer Grand Challenges is the ambition to build a global cohort of future leaders. And so we want to see how teams will use the opportunity to train and develop students and postdocs over the lifetime of the award.

Laurie Dudley 14:43

And finally, Patient Advocate involvement and engagement. As I mentioned, funded teams will need to recruit appropriate patient advocates. We believe that involving people affected by cancer through meaningful and impactful Patient Advocate involvement and engagement activities ensures patients needs

Laurie Dudley 15:00

are always at the heart of research, and that there are clear and significant benefits for patients. This is something we know some applicants are very familiar with, and others may have little or no experience of. So if you would like to ask more questions about advocacy, we'd be happy to talk to you.

Laurie Dudley 15:17

So as we've mentioned, the first part of the Cancer Grand Challenges application process is to submit a brief expression of interest or EOI. The EOI is about 4000 words and provides an overview of your team's approach to solving the challenge, a description of the team, the impact you aim to have, and how you will involve people affected by cancer. So I don't think there's a huge amount to say about the EOI itself other than to direct you to our application guidelines, which are available to download from the Apply page on our website cancergrandchallenges.org, but we'd be happy to answer any questions either directly or later in this webinar. And to access an EOI form you'll need to do two things. One is to sign up on Cancer Research UK's online grants portal, which is CancerResearchUK.flexigrant.com, there's a link in the guidelines, and complete an online pre-submission questionnaire on the CGC website. Now that questionnaire isn't part of the formal scientific review, it's just used by CRUK and NCI colleagues to ensure applicants are eligible and are proposing Grand Challenge-style research.

Laurie Dudley 16:23

The deadline to submit the prequestionnaire is the 15th of June, one week before the deadline of 22nd of June, by which date teams will need to submit the EOI into Flexi Grant. The EOI won't go to your host institution for approval and will come directly to us.



Laurie Dudley 16:41

So our scientific committee will meet over the summer to review all the EOIs that have been submitted. The committee will consider each application on its own merit and won't get any steer from us about the number of EOIs to shortlist against each challenge, or even whether to shortlist any EOIs against any particular challenge.

Laurie Dudley 17:00

We don't prescribe the number of teams that can be shortlisted. But just practically speaking, we can't realistically bring more than 12 teams to interview, so that's our cap.

Laurie Dudley 17:11

And you can see this in the EOI guidelines, but just briefly, the assessment criteria on which the committee will base its recommendations are quality, relevance, innovation, team and impact. So just briefly, taking each of those quality that work proposed must be of the highest international scientific calibre. Relevance, there must be a clear plan to address the challenge as it has been articulated. Innovation, the work must involve the development of new methodologies and approaches to tackle the challenge in a novel way. Teams, we've said the very best team should be assembled to address the challenge. The team must be stellar, interdisciplinary, international, well organised and lead and incorporate training for future leaders and cancer research. And impact, the ambition must be that the results of the proposed research could have significant benefit for patients and/or the wider public in the long term. Now that said, the endpoint of a cancer Grand Challenges award doesn't need to be a clinical intervention or clinical impact within the duration of the award.

Laurie Dudley 18:13

Shortlisted teams will receive detailed feedback following the scientific committee review. There may also be specific feedback for some teams who had promising proposals but didn't make the final 12 if that's the final number. But due to the likely volume of applications, we will not be able to provide feedback to unsuccessful teams as a default.

Laurie Dudley 18:34

And then just very briefly, I'll just say a few words on the full applications. So as Tony mentioned, shortlisted teams will receive 30,000 pounds sterling in seed funding to enable them to build up their full application. This will be issued to the lead investigators' host institution as a grant by CRUK. And essentially this money is there to support shortlisted teams to collaborate and network during the build stage of the full application and to cover the costs of attending their interview in London later in the year. It's not supposed to be used for research per se, and you don't need to have any plans for its use at EOI stage.



Laurie Dudley 19:10

And so there are two components of the full application; the written part and the interview. Again, I don't think there's any need to cover these in great detail here. So in short, the written application will be about 20,000 words and will provide far greater detail of the scientific approach and the experimental methods proposed, some of these plans for advocacy, a summary of the governance structures that will be used to manage the research programme and a full budget for the duration of the research.

Laurie Dudley 19:37

The submission deadline for this will be the 26th of October 2023. All applicant teams will then be expected to attend an interview with the scientific committee here in London. Interviews will take place across three days from the 11th to the 13th of December. This will be an opportunity for you to make your case to the committee and to answer any questions they have. The committee will make its recommendations to

Laurie Dudley 20:00

Cancer Research UK, there is budget for four teams in this round of Cancer Grand Challenges, and the joint committee of NCI and Cancer Research UK leadership will make its final decisions soon after the interviews. And then the exciting part starts, it'll be over to the funded teams to get to work tackling these challenges.

Laurie Dudley 20:19

So I guess the final thing to mention today is to point you in the direction of where you can get more detailed information about the Cancer Grand Challenges initiative. The best place to start is our website cancergrandchallenges.org. There you can download our expression of interest guidelines, find advice on building your patient advocate involvement and engagement plans, and read more about the nine challenges, our existing funded teams, and the scientific committee who will be reviewing your application. You can also subscribe to our newsletter to make sure you're kept fully informed of all the key milestones and news from the initiative.

Laurie Dudley 20:51

But if you take one action away from today's call, it should be that if you are thinking of submitting an application and haven't already contacted us, we strongly encourage you to get in touch as soon as possible. You can email us at info@cancergrandchallenges.org or phone +442034698855. Note that our office is based here in the UK so you won't get through to an operative outside British



working hours, but you can leave a message and we'll call you back. And finally, you can also follow us on Twitter and LinkedIn using the handles on the screen.

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