



# Darwin Initiative

Guidance Notes for Applicants: Round 32

2026 - 2027



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs



**UK International  
Development**

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

These guidance notes provide information on:

- what can be funded
- how to apply
- the process used to select projects for funding

Applicants should also read the Finance Guidance, which explains:

- what budgetary information you need in your application
- how the payments will be made if your application is successful, and how you should manage your budget
- when reporting is due and how it is linked to payments

Applications are made through the online application portal **Flexi-Grant** at [bcfs.flexigrant.com/](https://bcfs.flexigrant.com/)

All guidance is available via the Flexi-Grant portal, and replicated on the Challenge Fund website below.

Applications are administered independently by NIRAS.

Please read all the available guidance including the separate Finance Guidance before requesting additional assistance, as these provide answers to most queries.

**Further resources and templates** to support your application are available on the [Darwin Initiative website](#), including:

Application Forms (for drafting purposes)  
Application Templates  
Flexi-Grant User Guide  
Claim Forms

Change Request Forms  
Terms and Conditions  
Reporting Forms  
Project Database

If you can't find the answer, please contact the Darwin Initiative Administration Team.  
Calls (Teams/Zoom/Phone) can be arranged by email.

## Darwin Initiative

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## Glossary

Biodiversity	"Biological diversity" means the variability among living organisms from all sources including, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.
Biodiversity Challenge Funds	Collective name for Defra's Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund and Darwin Plus.
Capability & Capacity	Capability refers to the types of ability (skills and knowledge) required for a task; Capacity refers to the amount of ability at a point in time to deliver a task.
Complementary	Whilst distinct, activities are compatible and support the delivery of results, as opposed to having a negative impact on each other such as duplication or competition for resources.
Country	Normally refers (unless otherwise stated) to any country on the eligible country list (see 1.3 and Annex A), and not countries such as the UK.
Defra	Darwin Initiative is a programme of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), UK Government.
DEC	Darwin Expert Committee is a group of independent experts in biodiversity and sustainable development that provides strategic advice, assesses proposals and makes recommendations to Defra on funding decisions.
Ethics	The values, such as fairness, honesty, openness, integrity, that shape how an individual or an organisation operates and interacts with others.
Evidence	Is information that demonstrates project actions, outputs, outcomes and impact. It varies in format, quality and relevance and can include, documented and undocumented experiences, data, studies, policies, best practices, from a range of perspectives. However evidence is particularly valued when it is quality assured, accessible and applicable.
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, see section 0 for details.
International organisations	Organisations that may have a presence in an eligible country, but a head office located in a country not listed as an eligible country (Annex A).
Lead Applicant	The individual who leads on the submission of the application and supporting materials, and will be the project contact point during the application process.
Lead Organisation	The organisation who will administer, lead and coordinate the delivery of the grant, accepting the Terms and Conditions of the Grant on behalf of the project.

Local/national organisations	Organisations of an eligible country (Annex A), with either a national or local remit, always formally registered within that country, and typically led by a national of the country.
Logframe	Logframes are a monitoring tool to measure progress against a Results Chain, comparing planned and actual results along a causal pathway, and including indicators, baselines, targets, as well as risks and assumptions.
Matched Funding	Additional finance that is secured to help meet the total cost of the project, including public and private sources, as well as quantified in-kind contributions.
NIRAS	Darwin Initiative Administrator; first point of contact for projects and applicants.
ODA	Official development assistance – commonly known as overseas aid – is when support, expertise or finance is supplied by one government to help the people of another country via activities that promote economic development and welfare as a main objective.
OECD DAC	The Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is responsible for defining and monitoring ODA.
OSJA	Overseas Security and Justice Assistance assessments may be carried out where project activities operate in, or are closely linked to, the security or justice sector (see 2.7)
Partner(s)	Have a formal governance role in the project, and a formal relationship with the project that may involve staff costs and/or budget management responsibilities; this includes the Lead Organisation.
Poverty	Poverty is multidimensional and not solely about a lack of money; it encompasses a range of issues that hinder people's abilities to meet their basic needs and better their life with dignity including a lack of income, land, or other means of access to the basic material goods and services needed to survive with dignity, or a deficiency in healthcare, security, education or necessary social relations.
Project Leader	The individual with the necessary authority, capability and capacity, and a full understanding of their role and associated obligations, who takes responsibility for delivering value for money, managing risk and financial controls whilst fulfilling the terms and conditions of the grant.
(P)SEAH	(Protection from) Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment.
Safeguarding	Broadly means preventing harm to people and the environment. In practice, efforts often focus on taking all reasonable steps to prevent sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) from occurring, and to respond appropriately when it does.

Scale	The ability to deliver greater impact of a proven approach, either through expanding the scope of activities within a given geography or focal issue, taking the approach into a new geography or focal issue, or through uptake by stakeholders that promotes systemic change.
Stakeholder	Are consulted, engaged and/or participate in project activities as they have an interest or concern in the project and its impact. They can also be partners, but if not, they would not have a budget management, or a formal governance role, within the project. Stakeholders are not homogenous groups, and will include layers of diversity within them (see 0).
Theory of Change	Explains the process of change by outlining causal linkages taking activities through to a desired outcome, being explicit about the assumptions underlying the expected causal pathways, and including an analysis of barriers and enablers as well as indicators of success. Often set out in a diagram and narrative form.
Value for Money	Good value for money is the optimal use of resources to achieve the intended outcomes.
Whistleblowing	Reporting of suspected wrongdoing, malpractice, or unethical behaviour within the workplace. Please see 2.6 for further information on safeguarding.

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***There are several key changes for Round 32 of the Darwin Initiative.***

- ***Eligible countries*** have been substantively revised from previous rounds, including a new requirement to work in ***biodiversity hotspots***. This focuses Darwin Initiative funding where it can have the most impact. See 1.3 and 1.2.
- ***Organisations*** will now be limited to ***lead one application per scheme, per round***. See 2.1.
- ***Darwin Initiative Main*** – Stage 1 application form is a shorter ‘concept note’, and grant size limits and minimum project length have changed. See 3.1.
- ***Darwin Initiative Extra*** – Application process is now a two-stage application process (retaining interview stage), and grant size limits have changed. See 3.2.
- ***Darwin Initiative Capability & Capacity*** – grant size limits and maximum project length have changed. See 3.3.
- No new call for applications for ***Darwin Initiative Innovation***.
- ***Gender Equality and Social Inclusion*** and ***Safeguarding*** requirements have been clarified. See 0 and 2.6.
- ***Assessment criteria*** have been clarified for all schemes. See 6.
- Guidance provided on expectation regarding ***budgeting for and facilitating engagement between British embassies and high commissions*** and projects. See 2.8.
- An ***Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy*** has been developed which sets expectations for how applicants may use AI when preparing BCFs applications. There is no requirement or expectation that AI is used, but where it is used it is critical that best practice is followed to maintain ethical and quality standards. See 2.13.

***This list is not exhaustive, and it is important you read and understand all guidance in full to ensure you meet the key fund requirements, including the eligibility requirements, and to strengthen your application.***

# 1 What kind of projects can be supported by the Darwin Initiative?

The Darwin Initiative supports communities to find just, scalable, and sustainable ways to conserve and restore nature while growing their economies and reducing poverty. It is one of Defra's Biodiversity Challenge Funds (BCFs)<sup>1</sup>, along with the Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund and Darwin Plus. It competitively awards grants for biodiversity conservation and multidimensional poverty reduction activities in eligible countries, helping these countries meet their commitments under the Multilateral Environment Agreements<sup>2</sup>, Sustainable Development Goals, and national policy.

The Darwin Initiative is one of several UK international challenge funds. Please carefully consider whether the Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, Darwin Plus, the GCBC<sup>3</sup> or OCEAN<sup>4</sup> grants programmes are a better match for your project before applying (also see 1.10).

## 1.1 The Aim of the Darwin Initiative

To receive funding, projects must help the Darwin Initiative achieve its overall objectives.

The intended impact of the Darwin Initiative is that the *rates of biodiversity loss and degradation are slowed, halted or reversed, with associated reductions in multidimensional poverty.*

To deliver on this, Darwin Initiative projects typically target the following outcome:

*Local communities and other stakeholders sustain improvements in policy and practice that result in **gains for biodiversity and associated reductions in multidimensional poverty.***

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.biodiversitychallengefunds.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) and their corresponding action plans, such National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), National Action Plans (NAPs) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

<sup>3</sup> Global Centre for Biodiversity and Climate: <https://www.gcbc.org.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> The Ocean Community Empowerment and Nature Grants Programme: <https://oceangrants.org.uk/>

Successful Darwin Initiative projects are likely to:

- facilitate changes that improve **both biodiversity conservation and reduce poverty** (see 1.2 and 1.4);
- operate in ways that make change likely to last beyond external funding, including enhancing the **capability and capacity** of national and local partners and stakeholders (see 1.5);
- strengthen, promote and use **evidence** to inform and scale changes (see 1.6 and 0);
- facilitate **large-scale benefits** for biodiversity and people, or test approaches that have the potential to deliver large-scale impact (see 1.6).

In achieving the outputs, cross-cutting co-benefits can be realised, including climate change mitigation and adaptation, and public health improvements such as reducing the risks of disease.

## 1.2 Biodiversity loss in eligible hotspots

To be eligible in Round 32, projects must work in one of 13 selected global biodiversity hotspots – and should encourage or enable local actors to tackle a **critical driver of biodiversity loss** within the hotspot. Round 32 focuses on 13 biodiversity hotspots because these are the places where the Darwin Initiative can deliver the greatest impact - the highest biodiversity value, the greatest threats, the strongest poverty reduction potential and enabling conditions, and contributions to UK climate and food security through the protection of critical ecosystems.

The focal terrestrial biodiversity hotspots are:

- Amazon
- Caribbean Islands
- Coastal Forests of Eastern Africa
- Congo Forests
- Eastern Afromontane
- Guinean Forests of West Africa
- Himalaya
- Indo-Burma
- Madagascar & Indian Ocean Islands
- New Guinea
- Philippines
- Sundaland
- Tropical Andes

These are mapped against eligible countries in Annex A.

Within eligible countries, all **freshwater** habitats are eligible and the list in Annex A highlights countries in which projects working in the **marine** environment are welcomed.

Projects **must** work within both an eligible country and an eligible hotspot (or marine/freshwater environment). The relevant countries and hotspots should be selected in the application form and correspond to the list in Annex A. Where you are working in multiple countries, you should also be working in at least one relevant hotspot per country.

Projects need not be working entirely within a hotspot to be eligible. In some cases, the most effective way to deliver impact within a hotspot is to also work beyond its boundaries. Where this is the case, projects are encouraged to do so. For example, where achieving meaningful biodiversity and poverty outcomes in a hotspot requires:

- Action at a national or regional level, such as influencing national or regional policy or land use planning, or building capacity to implement the policy.
- Addressing demand for nature-depleting products outside the hotspot. For example, shifting urban cooking fuel markets away from charcoal to reduce forest loss.
- Growing nature-positive markets outside a hotspot. For example, improving standards or traceability for a product sustainably sourced from a hotspot (and which might also be sourced from elsewhere).
- Growing markets beyond the hotspot that attract people away from nature-depleting livelihoods. For example, where expanding income opportunities outside a hotspot should demonstrably reduce pressure on biodiversity within the hotspot itself.
- Matched funding would increase overall project effectiveness, *and* this other funding must be used beyond the relevant hotspot(s).

For Capability and & Capacity projects, similarly, the primary aim must be to build capability and capacity to address biodiversity loss and poverty within one or more hotspots. The most effective way to do this may be to work beyond the hotspot boundaries. For example, where an organisation or network wants to build conservation capacity globally, and excluding participants working beyond eligible hotspots would lead to worse outcomes for participants working in hotspots.

### 1.3 Eligible Countries

In Round 32, parts of 35 countries are eligible. We're prioritising global biodiversity hotspots because they are where the Darwin Initiative is likely to deliver the greatest biodiversity gains per pound invested. The 13 global biodiversity hotspots were chosen because they combine: among the highest concentrations of threatened, irreplaceable species; potential to reduce poverty; enabling conditions for lasting, transformative change; and in some cases, a criticality in regulating climate and global food systems that the UK relies on.

Focusing our effort in fewer, highest-priority places will also enable us to achieve better coordination and cumulative impact in those places, reducing the risk that we spread effort too thinly to influence large-scale and lasting change.

Darwin Initiative is entirely **Official Development Assistance (ODA) funded**, and therefore projects must promote the economic development and welfare of eligible countries (see Annex A) as a primary objective. Existing projects not working in the revised list of eligible countries will still be honoured.

Projects applying to work in a UMIC must clearly **demonstrate a stronger case** for support. UMIC applications must clearly demonstrate that they will:

- Benefit poor women and men and areas critical for biodiversity.
- Avoid funding goods or services that UMIC governments could reasonably finance themselves.
- Justify why objectives can only be achieved using donor (co-)funding.
- Mobilise sustainable finance or justify where this is not feasible or appropriate.

Projects involving UMICs are only likely to be funded if they also:

- Strengthen host-country commitments to conservation and poverty reduction.

## 1.4 Poverty Reduction

This section summarises what applicants must do to demonstrate that a project is likely to contribute to poverty reduction.

**Be specific about the people your project is intended to benefit.** Identify the groups you are targeting, where they are, and why they are poor or vulnerable in that context. You do not need perfect data, but you should provide a credible, context-based explanation of their situation and how benefits are expected to reach them, including any differences within communities.

**Set out what you mean by poverty reduction in your project.** Enabling poor women and men to increase their incomes is just one of many ways that projects can support people to emerge from poverty. Projects can also help poor women, men and children to improve their: food security, health, education, access to resources, resilience to shocks, or voice and participation in decisions. You can choose which dimension(s) of poverty your project is best-placed to influence.

**Provide a clear and plausible pathway linking your activities to both biodiversity outcomes and improvements in people's lives.** Explain the mechanism by which change will happen, rather than relying on general statements about the importance of biodiversity. We recognise that, particularly for landscape-scale or systems-focused work, there may be uncertainty at the outset. You are not expected to prove impacts in advance, but you should set out a credible rationale for how your approach could lead to poverty reduction over time, and how you will test and adapt this as the project progresses.

Use appropriate evidence to support your approach: this can include a mix of local knowledge, partner experience, comparable initiatives, and early-stage analysis rather than requiring extensive baseline data. More important is that your logic is coherent, grounded in the context, and open about key assumptions and uncertainties.

**Consider who is included or excluded, and how benefits and opportunities will be shared.** This includes attention to gender inequality and other forms of marginalisation where relevant. You should aim to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities and, where appropriate, describe how your approach could support more equitable outcomes.

You should also consider potential unintended negative effects on the people you are seeking to benefit and outline reasonable steps to avoid or mitigate these. It is critical that you have appropriate risk management and safeguarding systems in place for your project, providing the requested evidence in your application.

Finally, for Main and Extra projects, your expected contribution to poverty reduction should be reflected in your logframe, with changes described in a way that can be monitored over time. See the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Guidance for further details.

The involvement of development and/or GESI specialists is encouraged to understand and design appropriate poverty reduction aspects of your project; it is critical that unintentional negative impacts are identified and mitigated against early in the design process, in addition to strengthening the opportunities.

An information note, called [Poverty and the Darwin Initiative](#), might help you understand the multiple dimensions of poverty and how biodiversity projects can meaningfully contribute to economic development and welfare of identified poor and/or vulnerable people.

## 1.5 Sustainability, Capability and Capacity

We expect projects to unlock benefits for biodiversity and people that last beyond donor funding. You should therefore explain how your approach will create sustained biodiversity and poverty reduction outcomes, rather than short-term gains that depend on continued external support.

Local or national organisations, systems, and individuals will need to continue, adapt, and scale change after the project ends. Achieving this requires strengthening both capability and capacity among local and national partners and stakeholders, as well as ensuring that the right structures, incentives, relationships, and resources are in place for change to endure. Capability refers to the skills, knowledge and leadership needed to deliver change, while capacity refers to the amount of ability to apply these at a given time. You should consider both individual capability and systems (time, staffing, systems, finance) and frame these clearly in terms of how they contribute to lasting impact.

All projects should leave behind a clear legacy. This might include stronger local institutions, embedded practices, improved governance arrangements, or enduring partnerships that continue to deliver outcomes. It may also include developing future leaders or strengthening the wider system within which biodiversity and development decisions are made. The emphasis should be on what will continue to function, evolve or influence others once Darwin Initiative funding has ended.

Your approach to sustainability should be proportionate and tailored to context. You do not need to demonstrate certainty that outcomes will persist, particularly for complex or system-level interventions, but you should set out a credible explanation of how your activities will contribute to longer-term change, and what factors will support or constrain this.

Projects should actively consider who benefits from these longer-term gains, including whether opportunities to build skills, take on leadership roles, or access resources are equitably distributed. Attention to gender and other forms of marginalisation should be reflected in how sustainable outcomes are designed and delivered (see 0).

A wide range of approaches may contribute to sustainability, including (but not limited to) training, mentoring, learning-by-doing, institutional strengthening, sharing risk with early adopters, and embedding new practices within policy or organisational systems. What matters is not the activity itself, but whether it leads to capabilities, relationships or systems that persist and are used.

Grants focussed primarily on capability and capacity are available, see 3.3, but all grants must include activities and/or structures that will enhance and strengthen the capability and capacity of identified local and national partners and stakeholders during the project and beyond.

Where international partners are involved, they should play a deliberate role in supporting locally led and sustainable outcomes. Local and national partners should have meaningful, stretching roles, with support designed to enable them to lead, adapt and continue work independently over time. In addition to technical areas (biodiversity, sustainable development), activities can and should include strengthening underpinning capabilities such as financial management, communication, monitoring, evaluation and learning, GESI, safeguarding, and risk management

## 1.6 Scale and ability to scale

The Darwin Initiative is looking for projects that go beyond small, highly localised results. You should show that your work either already operates at a meaningful scale, or has a strong and credible pathway to reach significant numbers of people or places over time.

In simple terms, we are asking: **could this approach spread, influence others, and keep delivering results without ongoing external funding?**

There are three main ways this can happen. First, your approach could be taken up in new places or by new groups. Second, it could become part of how governments, markets, or organisations operate, so that it continues as standard practice. Third, it could change behaviours or incentives in ways that encourage others to follow and sustain the approach.

You should explain your ambition for this wider change and how your project will contribute to it. For example:

- how your approach could be used in other locations or by others, and what would make that likely
- how you will work with partners (such as government, private sector, or civil society) to embed your approach more widely
- how you will encourage changes in behaviour, practices, or incentives that support longer-term impact

You do not need to prove that this will happen, but your explanation should be clear and realistic. Where possible, draw on relevant experience - this could be your own work, partner experience, or examples from elsewhere that suggest your approach could spread or be adopted more widely.

You should also be open about any challenges. Briefly note the main barriers to wider uptake (for example, cost, local context, or incentives) and how you will try to address them.

Finally, explain why the benefits of your work are likely to last. This could be because local organisations take ownership, demand continues, policies change, or new funding becomes available. Large-scale change often happens after a project ends, so the focus is on whether your project is likely to start or unlock that process.

Projects that test or apply approaches with clear potential to grow, influence wider systems, or attract further investment are more likely to be supported.

## 1.7 Evidence and refined best practices

*The **strengthening, promotion and use of evidence** (including best practices) to **inform and scale** action, is at the core of the Darwin Initiative.*

**Evidence** ranges greatly in format, quality and relevance and includes documented and undocumented experiences, data, studies, experiments, observations, peer-reviewed papers, policies, best practices etc. and is particularly valuable when it is:

- **accessible** – people should be able to get at it
- **comprehensible** – people should be able to understand it
- **useable** – it should suit the needs of people, and
- **assessable** – interested people should, if necessary, be able to assess its quality.

Often overlooked, the role of local knowledge and evidence held by indigenous groups and local communities is vital and should be considered by projects in their design and delivery, abiding by ethical best practices.

By improving the quality, accessibility and use of evidence and best practices, decisions by individuals and organisations funded by the Darwin Initiative and beyond should lead to more effective solutions and greater impact.

*Applicants must use evidence to provide confidence that the project has demonstrated a need, understood the context, made fair assumptions, identified the risks and as a result has been designed well.*

The performance of projects is assessed based on the quality of evidence that the project develops, collates and presents in the reporting cycle - Half Year Reports, Annual Reports, Final Reports - and other MEL activities.

Consideration should be given to opportunities to strengthen the value of evidence produced by projects, by improving its accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and quality. For example, incorporating experimental elements within projects to test and compare approaches are welcomed.

All evidence gathering and use must be conducted within a robust ethics framework (see 0) that respects the prior informed consent of, and benefit sharing with, the owners of such evidence, in addition to appropriate procedures related to the collection, storage and use of personal data.

Reflecting these ethical considerations, all projects should consider and set out the central role of evidence throughout the project and beyond, in developing the idea and approach, strengthening the implementation of the project, and the uptake of new evidence to help secure the project's legacy.

Where projects are proposed in geographic/thematic areas with existing related activities, demonstrating an understanding of these, how the proposed project aligns, and how the project adds value, will help support the case for the project. Conversely, a lack of awareness or understanding of related activities can undermine confidence in the proposal.

## 1.8 If your project seeks to influence or strengthen markets

Markets can both drive or slow biodiversity loss and climate change; many Darwin Initiative projects therefore seek to influence how markets work. A 2024 review<sup>5</sup> found that while some Darwin Initiative grantees are taking cutting-edge approaches, many can improve markets and livelihoods interventions.

If your project seeks to influence markets, please consider the questions in the table below whilst preparing your application. The Darwin Expert Committee are likely to pay attention to these same questions.

Question	Promising signs	Red flags	Application section
How was the market selected?	Consideration of relevance of the focal market to project goals, feasibility of intervention, and commercial viability.	No explicit justification for the choice of market.	Problem the project is trying to address; Methodology.
What constraints will be addressed?	Evidence of a robust understanding of how the market works. Proposed interventions target market critical constraints identified through market analysis.	Proposed interventions leap to solutions (e.g. training, input provision) without demonstrating an understanding of how the market works or what constraints are faced.	Problem the project is trying to address; Methodology.
Is there a commercially viable opportunity?	Evidence of a market opportunity (potential buyers, scale of opportunity, growth potential), ideally backed up with commercial data (e.g. costs, prices, profitability, sales volumes).	Unclear who would buy the produce/whether there is a legitimate market opportunity – particularly in “niche” conservation markets (honey, handicrafts, non-timber forest products (NTFPs)).	Methodology; Change expected; Pathway to change; Sustainable benefits
Do you have the right skills?	Teams with experience in economic development and/or business/private sector.	Teams mostly staffed with natural scientists / conservation practitioners	Project partners; Project staff, CVs
Are you partnering with the right people?	Projects partnering with relevant market actors (e.g. buyers, processors, input suppliers, regulatory bodies).	Projects only engaging primary producers (e.g. farmers)	Project partners; Methodology

Proposals may not contain all this information – but good proposals should at least plan to collect this information at the start of the project through, e.g., scoping/market studies.

We would welcome some Capability and Capacity scheme applications that seek to collaboratively build market facilitation capacity at scale to improve grantees' capability to influence markets.

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<sup>5</sup> See the “Evaluation of livelihoods programming” Study report which can be found on the [Darwin Initiative website](#).

## 1.9 Openness to different species and solutions

The Darwin Initiative **assesses applications individually** against the published criteria; it does not strategically prioritise particular group of species, or particular solutions to the drivers of biodiversity loss and poverty.

## 1.10 Funding from any other UK Government body

Applicants are required to indicate whether they have received, applied for, or plan to apply for any other UK Government funding for their proposed project or a similar project. If this is the case, applicants are required to disclose details of their applications, explaining how the activities funded by BCFs are distinct and complementary.

However, applicants cannot make multiple funding applications for the same or similar project in the same year to Darwin Initiative, IWT Challenge Fund, Global Centre on Biodiversity for Climate (GCBC) and/or Ocean Community Empowerment and Nature (OCEAN) Grants Programme. Failure to declare multiple applications for the same or similar project could result in all applications being rejected.

# 2 Project Requirements

## 2.1 Lead Organisation and Project Leader

**Applications must be made by the Lead Organisation**, not an individual, agreeing to the Terms and Conditions (see 2.12) including managing the grant, its finances, reporting and governance. Foreign governments and their agencies cannot be Lead Organisations, except for universities that receive government funding (providing the application they are submitting isn't for "business as usual" work that should be covered by the government funding, as per the usual requirements).

UK government agencies can be Lead Organisations or partners.

*Lead Organisations can be based anywhere, but we strongly encourage projects to have in-country Lead Organisations where possible.*

The maximum annual value of funds requested should not exceed 25% of the Lead Organisation's average annual turnover/income for the previous 3 years.

Under Round 32, **organisations can only lead one application per scheme**. Organisations may appear on an unlimited number of applications as partners. Local affiliates of global networks can apply separately but the Lead Organisation must align with the accounts shared as evidence of the organisation's financial capacity and be the contracting body for the grant agreement.

We expect Lead Organisations to demonstrate openness, honesty and realism about their capability and capacity, accepting accountability and responsibility for performance along the project chain.

*The **Project Leader** is the individual with the necessary authority, capability and capacity, and a full understanding of their role and associated obligations to take responsibility for delivering value for money, managing risk and financial controls whilst fulfilling the terms and conditions of the grant.*

The Project Leader will be the first point of contact for all aspects of project management, and will be responsible for the overall management of the project and accountability of the award, on behalf of the institution they represent.

Where the Project Leader is not employed by the Lead Organisation, the reasoning behind this should be made clear in the application, including their capability to control and be held accountable for the proposed project.

Given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Biodiversity Challenge Funds have taken the decision to suspend all bilateral engagement with Russia. Russian organisations are ineligible to be a Lead Organisation or Partner or involved in any way with any Biodiversity Challenge Fund grant.

If you are unclear whether these restrictions apply in your specific case, please contact us.

## 2.2 Project Partners

Partnerships between organisations aligning their interests around a common vision, combining their complementary resources, experiences and competencies and sharing risk, can maximise impact in terms of scale, quality, sustainability and benefits.

***All projects are required to be led by or partner with local/national organisations of the country/ies in which it is based, with the meaningful and early engagement of in-country stakeholders.***

Differing from Stakeholders, Partners have a formal governance role in the project, and a formal relationship with the project that may involve staff costs and/or budget management responsibilities. All projects must be co-developed with their partners. Project partners must be organisations, not individuals.

In contrast, Stakeholders would not have a budget management or a formal governance role within the project but are consulted on, engaged with, and participate in project activities.

For projects working in multiple countries, we would expect you to have at least one named local/national organisation in each project country – this can either be the Lead Organisation or a named project partner. If this is not possible, then you must provide an explanation in your Stage 2/Single Stage application form.

## 2.3 Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) is comprised of two key terms. The BCFs define these as:

- **Gender Equality:** is about addressing inequalities and transforming the distribution of opportunities, choices and resources available to girls, women and non-binary individuals so that they have equal power to shape their lives and participate in the process thereby increasing equality between people of all genders.
- **Social Inclusion:** Is about making sure that everyone-especially people who have been disadvantaged or excluded because of their identity- has the chance, ability, and dignity to fully participate in society and its decision-making.<sup>6</sup>

*The BCFs have committed to be a GESI sensitive programme.*

*A **GESI Sensitive approach** is understood to demonstrate programming will “do no harm”, not exacerbate inequality and ensure meaningful and context-appropriate engagement and participation of those involved in the project.*

*For further information please see our [GESI Ambition Statement](#).*

GESI adopts an ‘intersectional’ approach, recognising that groups are not homogenous, and that people face overlapping discrimination based on age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and other characteristics i.e. individuals can face multiple barriers.

Evidence from the *Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation* ([www.espa.ac.uk](http://www.espa.ac.uk)) programme demonstrates that individuals access resources differently depending on their gender and social background. As a result, women and men often develop knowledge about different species, their uses and their management.

An understanding of GESI therefore provides a better understanding of relationships with the environment, to understand the context in which the project is working within and ensure approaches are developed that are appropriate for the context and are sensitive to the various ways in which different identities access, use and control natural resources and services.

With a strong ethical foundation and clear evidence base, prioritising gender equality and social inclusion is an important public commitment of the UK Government — and therefore a core principle of this fund.

Considering GESI will help you to develop stronger projects as it enables a better understanding of relationships between society and the environment (power, knowledge, needs, roles and priorities). It helps identify the multitude of ways that different people access, use, and control natural resources and ecosystem services; enabling equal (or equitable) opportunities to benefit for all.

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<sup>6</sup> The BCFs understand Disability Inclusion and Indigenous People and Local Communities (IPLC) to be included within Social Inclusion.

### 2.3.1 GESI in your application

The approach taken to promoting equality between persons of different gender and social backgrounds and ensuring individuals achieve equitable outcomes **will be assessed** at the proposal stage. While it is acknowledged that projects may deliver a GESI sensitive approach differently across the various schemes, all successful projects must be able to demonstrate that they:

- Understand the GESI context in which they operate, ensuring activities and interventions are designed and implemented with full consideration of relevant contextual factors.
- Ensure early inclusive and meaningful participation of all those engaging with the project.
- Will not contribute to, reinforce, or create any further inequalities<sup>7</sup>.

The above are essential to projects achieving GESI sensitive standard, however projects are encouraged to push beyond these to deepen and improve their GESI contribution.

For information on how to achieve a more ambitious GESI approach, please see the diagram below:



Figure 1: A diagram of the GESI scale

Applicants will be required to conduct a GESI Analysis as part of their application to evidence their understanding of the context in which the proposed project is working. A GESI Analysis should consider the following six principles:

1. **Rights:** Legal and customary.
2. **Practice:** Attitudes, customs, and beliefs.
3. **Environment:** Stressors and vulnerability.
4. **Roles and Responsibilities:** Division of time, space, and labour.
5. **Representation:** Participation, inclusion, and power.
6. **Resources:** Access and control of assets and services

The findings from this GESI Analysis should be integrated into the design and implementation of the project, making note of any risks identified within the project's risk register. Projects that are able to demonstrate the **integration of GESI considerations in their design and delivery plans**, will **score more highly** than those that cannot.

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<sup>7</sup> As no action is neutral, by not giving due consideration to GESI, projects could unintentionally exacerbate inequalities, reinforce barriers or cause harm to already disadvantaged groups.

For further information, please see the [Gender Equality and Social Inclusion](#) resource page on the Darwin Initiative website.

## 2.4 Value for Money

Projects must demonstrate strong Value for Money in terms of expected impacts from each pound spent.

### What is value for money?

- **Value for money means aiming for the best feasible project for amount spent.** This means drawing on evidence to carefully appraise possible objectives and delivery options.
- **It does not mean only doing the cheapest things.** We need to understand what drives costs and make sure that we are getting the best outcomes for the lowest price.
- **Nor do we just do the easiest things to measure.** We need to explain what we value, be innovative in how we assess and monitor value for money and what results we are trying to achieve with UK taxpayers' money.
- **Value for money is not something that applies only to project design.** It should drive decision making throughout the project cycle and in relation to running costs and evaluations.

Partners must demonstrate that they are pursuing continuous improvement and applying stringent financial management and governance to reduce waste and improve efficiency. This can include the consideration of evidence from relevant historical and existing initiatives, and reflect this in project design, incorporating lessons learnt, to maximise the chance of success.

Projects should secure matched funding to help meet the total cost of the project, from public and/or private sources, as well as quantified in-kind contributions as far as possible. For projects working in Upper Middle Income Countries, there are specific requirements re matched funding. See 1.3 for more details.

For further guidance, see *Finance Guidance* (available on the Darwin Initiative website).

***Funded Projects should not significantly cut across or duplicate the work of others as this is inefficient and provides poor value for money***

Projects should openly acknowledge the work of others (past and present), and in particular demonstrate in their application an understanding of projects within their area (thematically and/or geographically) to clearly establish how the project will be complementary and add value.

## 2.5 Ethics

Projects are expected to meet the **key principles of good ethical practice** and to demonstrate this in the application. All projects must:

- meet **all legal and ethical obligations** of all territories/countries and organisations involved in the project, including relevant access and benefit sharing legislation pertaining to the utilisation of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge;
- follow **access and benefit sharing best practice**<sup>8</sup> where legislation is incomplete or absent;
- include strong **leadership and participation from contributing territories/countries** and the communities involved to enhance the incorporation of their perspectives, interests and knowledge, in addressing the wellbeing of those directly impacted by the project;
- recognise the value and importance of **traditional knowledge**, alongside international scientific approaches and methods;
- respect the **rights, privacy, and safety of people** who are impacted directly and indirectly by project activities;
- use **Prior Informed Consent** (PIC) principles with communities;
- protect the **health and safety** of all project staff; and demonstrate this through an appropriate Health, Safety and/or Security policy or Security Plan;
- uphold the **credibility of evidence**, research and other findings.

**Funding may be frozen or withdrawn in the event that these principles are not met.**

Staff involved in the design or conduct of research should maintain the independence and integrity of the process, including intellectual detachment from personal convictions relating to the topic.

Where projects present human rights or International Humanitarian Law risks (e.g., enforcement, security/justice links), applicants must also meet requirements in 2.7 on Human rights.

## 2.6 Safeguarding

Defra believes that everyone regardless of age, gender identity, disability, sexual orientation, ethnic origin or other protected characteristic<sup>9</sup> has the right to be protected from all forms of harm, abuse, neglect and exploitation. If you have any questions or concerns around Safeguarding please contact the fund administrators NIRAS for further advice and guidance or visit the [Safeguarding Resources](#) page on Darwin Initiative website.

Projects will be required to meet safeguarding minimum standards prior to funding and show continued commitment and improvement to their safeguarding approach throughout the project life cycle.

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<sup>8</sup> Find the text of the relevant Convention on Biological Diversity Protocol (the Nagoya Protocol) as well as helpful factsheet here: <https://www.cbd.int/abs>

<sup>9</sup> Darwin Initiative is a UK government fund, and it is against UK law to discriminate against someone because of a protected characteristic, these are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation ([www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics)).

*Defra has a **zero tolerance for inaction to tackling abuse and/or exploitation of any person**. This means: zero tolerance for acts of SEAH; for inaction to prevent, report or respond to SEAH; and zero tolerance for retaliation against victim-survivors or whistleblowers. It does not mean having zero cases of SEAH being reported. Reporting is strongly encouraged and should not be penalised.<sup>10</sup>*

Safeguarding is an iterative process; partners must be prepared to discuss and strengthen their safeguarding capability and capacity to **prevent, listen, respond and learn** throughout the project lifecycle.

Applications are scored based on the 6 Minimum Recommended Actions as outlines in the Common Approach to Protection from SEAH ([CAPSEAH](#)). Please refer to the CAPSEAH guidelines when demonstrating your organisation's commitment to safeguarding and the prevention of SEAH.

**Lead Organisations must demonstrate that they:**

- have appropriate **safeguarding policies and procedures** in place, tailored to the project and reflecting GESI factors and power relationships, to **protect staff, implementing partners, the public and beneficiaries**.
- appoint a suitably qualified [Safeguarding Focal Point \(SFP\)](#) to carry out safeguarding/PSEAH (protection from sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment) work within the project. The SFP may be a separate member of staff or have safeguarding as an additional responsibility.
- take **all reasonable and adequate steps to prevent** sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) of any person (**staff, implementing partners, the public and beneficiaries**) linked to the delivery of the grant. An **acceptance and adherence** to the [IASC 6 Core Principles](#), and/or [Core Humanitarian Standard \(CHS\)](#) is required by the terms and conditions of the grant (see Annex B).
- ensure **all partners** understand and meet a recognised minimum safeguarding standard. Lead organisations should include protection from SEAH as part of their Due Diligence process.
- swiftly and appropriately **action any suspicions or complaints of SEAH** to stop harm occurring, investigate and report to relevant authorities (for criminal matters) when safe to do so and after considering the wishes of the survivor.
- **immediately report to Defra** ([ODA.Safeguarding@defra.gov.uk](mailto:ODA.Safeguarding@defra.gov.uk)) any allegations or suspicions of sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment, this includes those that are not directly related to the programme but would be of significant impact to their partnership with Defra or the reputation of Defra or UK Aid.

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<sup>10</sup> Taken from Common Approach to Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (CAPSEAH) Part 2: Common PSEAH Principles found here: <https://capseah.safeguardingsupporthub.org/common-approach#part2>

**Requirements for funding:** The lead organisation must demonstrate that they have:

1. a **safeguarding policy**, which includes a statement of commitment to safeguarding and a zero-tolerance statement on inaction to harassment and sexual exploitation and abuse;
2. a detailed and up to date **register of safeguarding issues (incident log)** raised and how they were dealt with;
3. **clear investigation and disciplinary procedures** for allegations and complaints, as well as a clear processes for disclosure ensuring a **victim-survivor centred approach** at all times;
4. **proactively shared** safeguarding policies and procedures with all **partners**, ensuring that they *understand and meet the required standards*, including safeguarding within contracts and offering support where required;
5. an **accessible and clearly communicated whistle-blowing mechanism** which protects whistle blowers from reprisals and includes clear processes for dealing with concerns raised;
6. **identified, assessed and monitor safeguarding risks** in the project risk framework;
7. have in place a **Code of Conduct** signed by all staff and volunteers that sets out clear expectations of behaviours - inside and outside the workplace - and what will happen in the event of non-compliance or breach of these standards. Prohibited actions should include as a minimum zero tolerance to inaction on bullying, harassment and SEAH;
8. a **safer recruitment approach** that includes appropriate background checks of new recruits and consultants; statements outlining safeguarding commitments in advertisements and job descriptions;
9. **all staff from lead organisation and project partners trained** in safeguarding and PSEAH before the commencement of any project activities;
10. provide **community sensitisation** on expected standards of behaviour of staff and how to report complaints and provide feedback on services.

In addition, we strongly encourage:

1. ensuring a **referral pathway** is established to enable a swift response to concerns raised by community members or staff;
2. senior leaders to prioritise and embed a culture of zero tolerance for inaction and ensure safeguarding processes and procedures meet industry best practice, creating an environment where breaches of safeguarding policy are less likely to happen.

Raising a safeguarding concern with Defra does not necessarily mean funding will be paused if the concern is investigated, and robust action is taken when allegations are upheld.

However, **failure to report to Defra any credible allegation, even in the case where it's determined to be unfounded, may result in the funding being stopped.** Reporting to Defra is in addition to, not a replacement of, any mandatory reporting required by others.

Failure to be able to demonstrate any of the above does not automatically exclude you from applying, rather it can help you *identify priority areas for strengthening*; if you feel that this applies to you, please contact us prior to applying.

The Safeguarding Resource & Support Hub ([safeguardingsupporthub.org](https://safeguardingsupporthub.org)) provides a valuable resource to support the development and delivery of safeguarding objectives.

## 2.7 Human rights

All UK-supported projects must uphold UK values and be consistent with the UK's domestic and international human rights obligations. Human rights and International Humanitarian Law risks must be considered by projects prior to funding, to ensure that risks are identified and appropriate mitigation measures are in place. This includes circumstances where there is a risk that project activities could inadvertently contribute to unlawful arrest or detention, unfair trial, or ill-treatment of individuals in custody.

Applications must clearly consider what measures will be taken to mitigate any risk that could directly or indirectly contribute to violations of human rights and/or International Humanitarian Law.

Projects that involve ranger-based interventions or support to enforcement actors must additionally demonstrate how they will uphold the rights, safety, and wellbeing of rangers and all individuals and communities they work with or may affect, including through appropriate safeguarding, accountability and risk-mitigation measures.

Where projects include activities operating in, or closely linked to, the security or justice sector, additional checks and assessments will be undertaken at Stage 2 of the application process. Further information on the assessment of such projects can be found in the UK Government's [Overseas Security and Justice Assistance \(OSJA\) guidance](#). These assessments are led by Defra, and applicants will be consulted where applicable.

Further information about the UK Government's approach to human rights can be found on GOV.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/human-rights-internationally> and see also 0 on Ethics which outlines requirements on consent, safeguarding, safety, and respect for affected people.

## 2.8 Working with British embassies and high commissions

**All applicants are required to contact British embassies and high commissions in the project country/ies;** a list of these can be found on GOV.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/world/embassies>. The purpose of this is to provide an opportunity for the British embassies or high commissions to be aware of proposed work and potentially advise on any security or political sensitivities. However, we recognise that their capacity to support or engage projects is varied and they may not always be able to respond. Applicants will **not be penalised** if they are unable to obtain comments from the embassy or high commission to submit alongside their application, provided they have **made an attempt** to contact them in sufficient time to allow engagement.

All applications may be shared with other UK Government Departments including the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); and their views may be taken into account in the assessment process.

If your application is successful, the relevant British embassies or high commissions will be informed and may, depending on their resource levels, seek to publicise the award, or be involved in any formal launch, and may wish to develop a relationship with the project during delivery.

All Darwin Initiative Extra and Main applicants should include up to £5,000 of their budget to engage with the British embassy or high commission during the project lifecycle. This can include facilitating visits to the project by British embassy or high commission staff, or the project attending events that may be convened by the embassy or high commission. You should include this budget at a time which

seems most relevant to your project's design. You do not need to organise this with the embassy/high commission at application stage; we would expect you to liaise with them only if your project is successful to determine the best way to allocate these funds. If the money is not spent or needs to be moved, then this can be reallocated via the change request process (see Finance Guidance).

## 2.9 Communications

All grants are funded by UK public money (raised through taxation), so it is important to be able to clearly communicate how public money is being utilised.

Initially, each applicant is asked to provide a very short, plain English summary in the application form of what the project will do, which if successful will be used in communication activities. This summary should be written for a non-technical audience with little or no prior knowledge of the issue, and clearly describe the project plan and intended outcome.

During delivery, projects will be expected to engage and support wider communications and awareness raising activities to inform audiences what they are planning, learning, and achieving, including the general public in the UK and/or the project country/ies.

Project titles should be descriptive, plain English, and express the value and aim of the project.

### 2.9.1 Open access policy and data sharing

The UK Government is committed to push for greater transparency in the availability and use of data to improve accountability, decision making, and to help deliver sustainable development outcomes to people living in poverty.

Projects are likely to generate significant outputs including datasets, best practices, peer-reviewed journal articles and technical reports which will be of value to other countries and stakeholders.

***All evidence and data produced must be made freely available and accessible to all, unless there are particular sensitivities involved.***

Data collection, analysis, management and storage protocols should be established to ensure the integrity of evidence and its subsequent use within the project, the Darwin Initiative and beyond.

This includes all derived and raw data on species, land cover and land use, through appropriate national, regional and global databases. For help in identifying databases, please refer to: [Compendium of guidance on key global databases related to biodiversity-related conventions](#)<sup>11</sup>. We encourage that where possible and appropriate data is shared directly or indirectly with Global Biodiversity Information Facility ([GBIF.org](#)) for wider accessibility.

The application should demonstrate that the publication of results and secure data storage has been thought through, a plan exists, and appropriate resources are included.

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<sup>11</sup> UNEP-WCMC. (2018). Compendium of guidance on key global databases related to biodiversity-related conventions. Cambridge (UK): UNEP-WCMC. <https://doi.org/10.34892/9XC8-0D10>

You may include appropriate costs in your budget to support open access publishing but be realistic about when articles will be published. It is likely that dates will fall outside the formal project, so it is worth considering matched funding for these costs.

Further information on open and enhanced access can be found on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

## 2.9.2 Transparency

In order to support understanding and in line with the aim of the Biodiversity Challenge Funds, successful project applications, along with subsequent reporting, will be published on the relevant fund website and elsewhere.

If there are any sensitivities within any of these, for example detailed species location data that would increase threats, please bring this to our attention early and these can be considered for redaction prior to publication.

## 2.9.3 Data protection and use of personal data

Information supplied in the application form, including personal data, will be used by Defra as set out in the Privacy Notice, available from the [Darwin Initiative website](#).

This Privacy Notice must be provided to all individuals whose personal data is supplied in the application form. Some information may be used when publicising the Darwin Initiative including project details (usually title, lead organisation, project leader, location, and total grant value).

## 2.10 Reporting

Projects must provide Annual and Half Year progress reports that are reviewed each year. These reports must provide robust reporting against intended objectives and include information on outputs, ethics and environmental impact.

All projects are required to submit a Final Report at the end of the award.

To continue receiving funding from the Darwin Initiative reports must be complete and within deadlines. If you do not meet these requirements your funding can be stopped.

## 2.11 Monitoring, evaluation and learning

A robust monitoring framework supports both the efficient delivery of the project as well the capability to demonstrate the impact and value for money achieved.

All Main and Extra applicants are required to include expected results against key Darwin Initiative Standard Indicators. Specific indicators are strongly recommended as they align with Defra priorities and global frameworks. You should provide an expected target for **at least one key biodiversity and one key poverty focused Standard Indicator** which will be achieved by the end of your project. It should be clear from your uploaded Theory of Change how these results map to your project's activities, Outputs and overall Outcome. Details on the specific Standard Indicators are included in the application form, and these will be considered when your applications are assessed (see 6.4).

**In the event of receiving a high number of Stage 1 Concept Note applications**, the figures provided will be used to inform an initial sift of applications. It is important that you propose realistic targets

which correspond to the methodology outlined and are appropriate to your context. The estimated results relative to the grant request will be considered.

Additionally, applicants to Main and Extra are encouraged to integrate formal impact evaluation into their projects particularly if:

- there is an important, clear evidence gap,
- there is an effective way for the project to address that evidence gap robustly and transparently,
- the project has sufficient resources, both in skills and funding/time, to do the evaluation.

Where these conditions are not met, the focus should be on monitoring of Standard Indicator and project indicators, learning, and adaptive management.

Should you be proposing such approaches, you will be asked to provide more information at Stage 2.

Further guidance is given in the “Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Guidance” and “Standard Indicator Guidance”, available on the Darwin Initiative website.

Darwin Initiative Extra Projects are required to commission an Independent Final Evaluation to report by the time that the project completes. The cost of this should be included in the project budget, and within the total project cost for MEL.

## 2.12 Terms and Conditions

Successful applicants will be issued a grant award letter with the Terms and Conditions that will apply to the grant, including the grant purpose, value, period, and reporting and financial arrangements.

Copies of the current Terms and Conditions are available (see Page 1), and you should understand these fully before making an application to ensure compliance will not be an issue. If applicants, such as public bodies, are subject to established approaches for example with insurance, liability or the Information Act, then please raise this with us as soon as possible as it may not be possible to accommodate them.

Defra retains the right to amend these terms and conditions at any time.

## 2.13 Use of AI

The Darwin Initiative permits the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in preparing applications and delivering projects, but its use is entirely optional and must follow strict standards. The policy aims to ensure that all submissions are accurate, transparent, and ethically produced, while minimising risks such as bias, data breaches, or fabricated information.

AI should be used only to support, not replace, human judgement. Applicants remain fully responsible for all content and must ensure that any AI-assisted outputs are truthful, based on real project information, and thoroughly checked for accuracy.

The policy places strong emphasis on protecting confidential and personal data, requiring the use of secure, approved tools, and prohibiting the input of sensitive information into public AI systems. It also requires transparency: applicants must declare whether and how AI has been used.

Acceptable uses include improving clarity, summarising existing information, and supporting drafting. However, AI must not be used to generate or invent evidence, complete key technical assessments, or replace stakeholder engagement.

Failure to comply with these requirements may result in disqualification.

The full Biodiversity Challenge Funds AI policy can be found on the Darwin Initiative website.

### 3 Funding Schemes

Table 1: Summary of Project Grants

Grant	Main	Extra	Capability & Capacity
<b>Duration</b>	2-5 years	2-5 years	1-3 years
<b>Application Stages</b>	Two	Single, with interview	Single
<b>Estimated Annual Number of Awards</b>	<20	<4	<20
<b>Type of Project</b>	Providing good evidence and expected to deliver strong results, and demonstrate the potential to scale	Demonstrating a clear scaling pathway, building on good evidence from smaller projects to scaling further	Focussed on developing the capability and capacity of national and local organisations
<b>Evidence (see 0)</b>	Good	Strong	Moderate
<b>Scoring Criteria</b>	Technical, Biodiversity, Poverty Reduction	Technical, Biodiversity, Poverty Reduction, Scaling (weighted)	Technical, Capability & Capacity
<b>Grant</b>	£200,000 - £1,000,000	£1,000,000 - £5,000,000	£75,000 - £250,000

### 3.1 Darwin Initiative Main

**Darwin Initiative Main** grants, ranging from £200,000 to £1,000,000 (averaging a maximum of £200,000/year<sup>12</sup>), are expected to deliver strong results for biodiversity conservation and multidimensional poverty reduction based on good evidence, and strongly demonstrate the potential to scale further.

**Duration:** Projects should last for between 2 to 5 years maximum, starting on or after 1 April 2027 (but before 30 September 2027), and complete by 31 March 2032.

**Scoring criteria:** Technical, Biodiversity, and Poverty Reduction

The assessors acknowledge the significant differences between the two stages, especially differences in the supporting evidence (e.g. CVs are not required at Stage 1). At Stage 1 assessors are looking for applicants and proposals that have the potential to deliver a competitive proposal at Stage 2. At Stage 2, assessors are looking for evidence that proposals tackle one of the major drivers of biodiversity loss in the priority hotspot, in ways that enable local people to gain lasting benefits, at a reasonable scale, with a strong probability of benefits lasting and scaling beyond the grant.

Capability and capacity building activities should form a core role within the approach, to underpin the legacy of the grant (see 1.5).

**Evidence:** available evidence (see 0) is expected to be good, and can include building on the successes and lessons learnt from elsewhere including previous projects (whether by the applicants or others).

**Scaling:** In addition to presenting evidence of how the approach will deliver outputs within the project lifespan, the project should articulate any evidence to support its ambition and vision to scale (see 1.6) their approach.

### 3.2 Darwin Initiative Extra

**Darwin Initiative Extra** grants, ranging from £1,000,000 to £5,000,000 (averaging a maximum of £1,000,000/year<sup>13</sup>), are intended for approaches that are on a clear scaling pathway: building on good evidence from previous Biodiversity Challenge Funds<sup>14</sup> projects and demonstrating the potential to scale further by completion, facilitating better biodiversity conservation and poverty outcomes within its lifetime.

This can be through landscape or replication scaling, or through delivering systems change (see 1.6) which will have sustained impact beyond the project's original scale.

**Duration:** Projects should last for between 2 to 5 years maximum, starting on or after 1 April 2027 (but before 30 September 2027), and complete by 31 March 2032.

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<sup>12</sup> Averaging a maximum of £200,000/year means that a 2-year project cannot exceed £400,000, 3-year project cannot exceed £600,000 and a 4-year project cannot exceed £800,000.

<sup>13</sup> Averaging a maximum of £1,000,000/year means that a 2-year project cannot exceed £2,000,000, 3-year project cannot exceed £3,000,000 and a 4-year project cannot exceed £4,000,000.

<sup>14</sup> Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund or Darwin Plus.

**Scoring criteria:** Technical, Biodiversity, Poverty Reduction, and Scaling

The **Scaling score** is **weighted** (x2) to emphasise the focus of the grant scheme.

Capability and capacity building activities should form a core role within the approach, to underpin the legacy of the grant (see 1.5).

**Evidence:** Projects will be expected to provide clear and strong evidence (see 0) from at least one previous Biodiversity Challenge Funds grant on expected results and the potential to scale; with a corresponding higher ambition, significance of outputs and quality of proposal to match the scale of finance and opportunity.

**Scaling:** Scaling (see 1.6) of the approach should be embedded within the project approach and should be well underway within the period of the grant.

Active Darwin Initiative Main projects are able to apply prior to completion in order to allow a distinctive new project to start with a gap, if successful, or a scaling of activities under Darwin Initiative Extra. Applicants at Stage 2 should provide clarity and distinct timings, activities and outputs between related projects in making the case for new additional support, preventing any duplication (perceived or real) or negatively impacting the value for money assessment of either grant.

### 3.3 Darwin Initiative Capability & Capacity

Darwin Initiative Capability & Capacity grants, ranging from £75,000 to £250,000, must **focus** on developing the capability and capacity of identified local and national organisations (civil society, research institutes and public bodies) whilst clearly setting out how the recipients will be able to more effectively deliver biodiversity conservation and multidimensional poverty reduction impact.

**Duration:** Projects should last for between 1 to 3 years maximum, starting on or after 1 April 2027 (but before 30 September 2027), and complete by 31 March 2030.

**Scoring criteria:** Technical, and Capability & Capacity

The capability and capacity building approach (see 1.5) to be used must be formulated and justified with evidence (see 0) in the application. Activities can include structured training, fellowships, work placements, mentoring, organisational development, network-building, and can be undertaken across all areas of project activity: biodiversity, poverty reduction, and project delivery.

Structured training elements must support locally based future and existing environmental leaders and staff of identified local/national organisations (reflecting an understanding GESI, see 0) to grow professionally and technically, ideally building lasting positive relationships between participants, and improving their ability to draw on professional and technical expertise relevant to delivering projects in line with Darwin Initiatives objectives.

Where strongly justified, activities can include very limited practical application of new skills and knowledge to embed them, but the grant must retain overall focus on how capability and capacity building will deliver future benefits for biodiversity and poverty reduction.

**IMPORTANT:** This scheme should not be used for small conservation projects and similar. Small conservation projects and similar are unlikely to be competitive under this scheme, compared to projects with a substantial focus on capability and capacity building.

Grants can support travel between different eligible countries, or for example between the UK and the eligible country (to the UK<sup>15</sup> or for UK-based experts to be posted overseas); however, any activities outside of the project country must be strongly justified.

In addition to technical areas (e.g. biodiversity, sustainable development), training can include financial, communication, monitoring and evaluation, safeguarding, and risk management amongst others.

Where the benefiting organisations are local non-governmental conservation actors, these organisations are encouraged, but not required, to be in a position, at the end of a Capability & Capacity grant, to lead or partner in a future application the Darwin Initiative or similar funds.

### 3.4 Size of projects

The size and length of a grant must be determined based on evidence and what is needed to deliver intended outcomes and impacts.

*Projects must present a **realistic budget** and **realistic timeframe**, and **not be overly ambitious** in what they hope to achieve.*

Ambitious proposals are welcome, but care needs to be taken not to be overambitious (or overly optimistic) as this can undermine confidence in the proposal to deliver its outcomes.

The maximum annual value of funds requested should **not exceed 25% of the Lead Organisation's average annual turnover/income** for the previous 3 years (see Finance Guidance for details).

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<sup>15</sup> Darwin Initiative cannot support/sponsor visa applications, it is entirely the responsibility of the project to ensure correct visas are obtained in time.

## 4 How to Apply

### 4.1 Darwin Initiative Funding Round 32 Timetable

The timetable for Darwin Initiative Funding Rounds for 2026-27 are as follows:

#### Darwin Initiative Main:

Call for Stage 1 Applications from **late May 2026 to 22:59 GMT (23:59 BST) on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> July 2026.**

Call for Stage 2 is by invitation only (application link to be provided) by **late October 2026.**

*We will be hosting a workshop for applicants invited to Stage 2 – specific dates to be confirmed but likely in early November.*

Stage 2 Application Deadline – **23:59 GMT on Monday 30<sup>th</sup> November 2026.**

Results are expected by end of **February 2027.**

#### Darwin Initiative Extra:

Call for Stage 1 Applications from **late May 2026 to 22:59 GMT (23:59 BST) Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> July 2026.**

Call for Stage 2 is by invitation only (application link to be provided) by **late September.**

*We will be hosting a workshop for applicants invited to Stage 2 – specific dates to be confirmed but likely in October.*

Stage 2 Application Deadline – **23:59 GMT on Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2026.**

Shortlisted applicants will be invited to provide clarifications from **late December 2026 to 23:59 GMT Monday 11<sup>th</sup> January 2027.**

Shortlisted applicants will be invited to interview (virtual) expected to be between **Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> January to Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> January 2027.**

Results are expected by end of **February 2027.**

#### Darwin Initiative Capability & Capacity:

Call for Applications from **late May 2026 to 22:59 GMT (23:59 BST) on Monday 31<sup>st</sup> August 2026.**

Results are expected by end of **December 2026.**

#### All Funding Rounds:

Successful projects are expected to start from **1<sup>st</sup> April 2027. You should consider the best date to start your project to allow for start-up and recruitment, based on the expected notification of results.**

All applications will be acknowledged **within 5 working days of the funding round close.** If you have not heard after 5 days, please contact the Darwin Initiative Administration Team via [BCF-Darwin@niras.com](mailto:BCF-Darwin@niras.com).

## 4.2 Completing the application form

All applications must be submitted:

- through Flexi-Grant, using approved templates where appropriate/indicated
- with fully answered questions, referencing evidence where possible, the word count indicates the level of detail required; if appropriate, n/a is acceptable.
- in English (or with translation in English as appropriate),
- attaching the required supporting evidence, and
- signed, with a PDF signature uploaded as part of the Flexi-Grant application.

### **IMPORTANT: Competition for funding is very strong. Applications which:**

- are incorrect, incomplete or very poor quality, including missing supporting evidence/attachments/translations, or
- do not match all published criteria, including eligible countries, partners, dates and budget limits or
- are submitted using the incorrect/unofficial template, or incorrect file format, or
- exceed stated page limits,
- do not meet single application per scheme per lead organisation criteria.

**will be rejected as ineligible.**

## 4.3 Additional guidance

In addition to this guidance document, there are a number of other guidance documents and resources available which will help you in preparing your application. This includes:

- Finance Guidance
- Flexi-Grant Guidance
- Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Guidance
- Standard Indicator Guidance
- Biodiversity Challenge Funds Risk Management Guidance
- Biodiversity Challenge Funds Terms & Conditions – all of the above can be found on the Darwin Initiative website: <https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/apply/>
- A number of other resources, such as past workshop proceedings and information notes, which can be found here: <https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/resources/>

Please read all the available guidance before requesting additional assistance, as these provide answers to most queries. If you can't find the answer, please contact the Darwin Initiative Administration Team – contact details are provided on page 2.

## 4.4 Supporting Evidence

The application form provides sufficient space to present your evidence and make your case: **ONLY the requested supporting evidence set out below should be submitted with your application.**

Table 2: Summary of Required and Optional supporting evidence.

	Main - Stage 1	Extra - Stage 1	Main - Stage 2	Extra – Stage 2	Capability & Capacity
<b>Cover Letter</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Required (2 sides of A4 maximum).</b> The cover letter is an opportunity to <b>support your application:</b> you can briefly indicate any significant points about your application or organisation but it should be focused, referring, where needed, to the application for further details rather than duplicating information. It should be presented on the lead organisation’s letterhead and appropriately signed. Responses to previous feedback should be included in the specific “feedback response” question in the application, not in your cover letter.		
<b>Logframe</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Required</b> on Stage 2 / Single Stage template.		<b>Indicators of Success (a simplified logframe)</b> is within the application form
<b>Theory of Change</b>	<b>Required</b> , on template provided <b>1 side of A4, PDF.</b>	<b>Required</b> , on template provided <b>1 side of A4, PDF.</b>	<b>Required</b> , on template provided <b>1 side of A4, PDF.</b>	<b>Required</b> , on template provided <b>1 side of A4, PDF.</b>	<b>Not required</b>
<b>Budget and Financial Evidence</b> See Finance Guidance, available online.	Required within application form only.	Required within application form only.	<b>Required</b> on correct <b>Excel template.</b> Two sets of audited or independently examined <b>accounts</b> covering <b>the last three financial years</b>		<b>Required</b> on correct <b>Excel template.</b> Two sets of audited or independently examined <b>accounts</b> covering <b>the last three financial years</b> , or other evidence of financial capacity as set out in the <b>Finance Guidance.</b>
<b>Workplan</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Required</b> on <b>Workplan template</b>		
<b>Safeguarding and associated policies</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Required</b> , Lead Organisation’s Safeguarding Policy and other associated polices (see 0) must be submitted as a <b>single PDF file.</b>		
<b>CVs and Job Descriptions</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Required</b> , 1 side of A4 per CVs in English (or job descriptions if vacant) of all the key project staff named in the application form <b>merged and submitted as a single PDF file.</b>		

	Main - Stage 1	Extra - Stage 1	Main - Stage 2	Extra – Stage 2	Capability & Capacity
See 0 for further guidance.			If you cannot secure a CV from a named Project Staff member, please provide an explanation why, along with a summary of the skills and experience of the team member concerned. CVs are important to demonstrate the skills an individual brings to the team.		
<b>Letters of support</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<p><b>Required</b> from all project partners (<b>including from the lead organisation</b>) on <b>headed paper</b> and <b>must be in English</b> (or translated – this does not have to be an official translation). If needed, please explain why any partner has not provided a letter of support.</p> <p>Letters of Support from key stakeholders are <b>encouraged but not required</b>.</p> <p>Letters of Support must be <b>merged and submitted</b> as a <b>single PDF file</b>, and provide strong evidence of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support for the need of the project</li> <li>• the role of the partner in the project</li> <li>• support for the application and the importance of the work to your organisation</li> <li>• your relationship with partners and stakeholders</li> <li>• your ability to deliver high quality results and enable productive partnerships any commitment to matched funding</li> </ul>		
<b>Risk register</b> See Risk Guidance, available online	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Submitted if awarded, on Risk Framework Template,</b> with Delivery Chain Mapping completed. Issues Log should not be completed.	<b>Required on Risk Register Template,</b> with completed Delivery Chain Mapping. Issues Log should not be completed.	<b>Submitted if awarded, on Risk Framework Template,</b> with Delivery Chain Mapping completed. Issues Log should not be completed.
<b>Counter Fraud, Bribery and Corruption Policy</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Not required</b>	Policy setting out compliance with the anti-bribery and anti-corruption Terms and Conditions <b>may be requested</b> at any point, but should not be submitted with your application.		
<b>Ethics Policy</b>	<b>Not required</b>	<b>Not required</b>	Policy setting out compliance with the key principles of good ethical practice (see 0) <b>may be requested</b> at any point, but should not be submitted with your application.		

	Main - Stage 1	Extra - Stage 1	Main - Stage 2	Extra – Stage 2	Capability & Capacity
<b>Map, List of references</b>	<b>Not required.</b> You should not submit additional materials (other than the required documents outlined above) with your application. Doing so <b>will make your application ineligible.</b>		To further support your application, if desired a map, and/or list of references can be optionally submitted in a <b>single combined PDF</b> . This can include a Theory of Change if not already explicitly required; hyperlinks are not permitted, and must not exceed a <b>maximum of 5 sides of A4</b> in total as additional pages will <b>make your application ineligible</b> .		

## 5 Assessment Process

### 5.1 General process for grants

All eligible applications that meet the required standard will be assessed by the **Darwin Expert Committee** (DEC), who are independent experts in biodiversity and sustainable development (see, <https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/about-us/darwin-expert-committee/>). In the event of receiving a high number of Stage 1 Concept Note applications for Main or Extra, estimated targets against key Standard Indicators for biodiversity and poverty will be used to inform an initial sift of applications (see 2.11).

DEC follows a strict code of practice: if any member has been involved in or is closely associated with an application, the applicant or a project partner, they **declare their interest** and play no role in its assessment or discussion at the Sift meeting.

Defra reserves the right to apply more stringent assessment at the Initial Review if the number of applications is high to ensure that the experts can robustly review those with the highest chance of being discussed at the Sift Meeting.

Due diligence is conducted on all projects prior to award. This includes additional checks related to project MEL, safeguarding, and financial capacity.

### 5.2 Darwin Initiative Capability & Capacity and Main process

An overview of the steps for assessing Capability & Capacity and Main grants are:

- 1) **Initial Review:** Applications that are poor quality, incomplete or do not meet the essential eligibility criteria or standard will be rejected. You will be informed of the reasons for rejection.
- 2) **Independent Expert Assessment:** Applications are reviewed and scored by at least three experts, against the assessment criteria (6.4) to inform the discussion at the Sift meeting.
- 3) **Sift meeting:** The experts discuss comments and agree the strongest applications to recommend for funding or inviting to Stage 2 (repeating step 2 and 3).
- 4) **Funding Decision:** Defra reviews DEC's recommendations and awards the grants or invite Stage 1 applications to Stage 2.

### 5.3 Darwin Initiative Extra process

Darwin Initiative Extra grants follow the same process as set out above, but has an additional **clarification and interview** stage, followed by a summary meeting:

- 1) **Initial Review:** Applications that are poor quality, incomplete or do not meet the essential eligibility criteria or standard will be rejected. You will be informed of the reasons for rejection.
- 2) **Independent Expert Assessment:** Applications are reviewed and scored by at least three experts, against the assessment criteria (6.4) to inform the discussion at the Sift meeting.
- 3) **First Sift meeting:** The experts discuss comments and agree the strongest applications to invite to Stage 2 (repeating step 2).
- 4) **Second Sift meeting:** The experts discuss comments and agree the shortlisted applications and clarification points.
- 5) **Clarifications:** Shortlisted applications are required to respond in writing to clarification questions from the Panel, and may potentially attend an interview (virtual).

- 6) **Summary meeting:** The experts discuss the applicants' responses and agree the strongest applications to recommend for funding.
- 7) **Funding Decision:** Defra reviews DEC's recommendations and awards the grants.

## 5.4 Results of applications

Once the Funding Decision has been made, **all Lead Applicants** (both successful and unsuccessful) **will receive notification** via email from Flexi-Grant.

Defra retains the **right to clarify any issues** raised during the application process or to award funding **subject to required amendments**. If the applicant is subsequently unable to meet the requirements of the award, Defra retains the right to withdraw the offer.

## 5.5 Feedback

Feedback is a valued method to support the development of capability of potential applicants, and strengthen current or future proposals in support of the objectives of the funds. Feedback may be provided by Darwin Expert Committee, Fund Administrator (NIRAS), and/or Defra.

*Table 3. Feedback*

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**Applicants recommended to Defra for funding** are provided **specific feedback** that may form a caveat of funding or a recommendation.

**Darwin Initiative Main and Extra** applicants invited to submit a Stage 2 application are provided **specific feedback** on their Stage 1 application; this **must be responded to in the** Stage 2 application form, briefly restating the feedback point, then clearly setting out how you have responded to it in the application.

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**Near-misses:** applications that are considered **competitive but narrowly miss** being invited to Stage 2 or recommended to Defra for funding are provided **specific feedback** on how to strengthen future applications.

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**Non-Competitive applications** that are significantly below the expected standard and would require substantial work to be competitive, are not provided with specific feedback but are encouraged to consider the application guidance and other available resources ahead of any future applications.

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This feedback is also utilised when reviewing funding guidance, workshops and articles.

## 5.6 Resubmission of applications

An unsuccessful application may **only be resubmitted once**, unless the proposed project is significantly different. You must explicitly set out how and where you have addressed all the comments/feedback **in the application form** for your resubmitted application: briefly restating the feedback point, then clearly setting out how you have responded to it in the application.

## 6 Assessment Criteria by scheme

The **evidence presented** in each application is **assessed** against the **criteria** below, to inform the awarding of grants.

Unless noted, all benefits or impacts are in **reference to the host country**.

At least **three experts assess** each application, with the scores combined into the **Application Score**; this score only informs the Sift Meeting, it does not determine the outcome.

All applications are expected to demonstrate an **acceptable level of evidence** (4 points or more in each score, see 6.5) to exceed the **indicative competitive threshold**.

The *Scaling Potential Score*<sup>a</sup> for applications in the Extra scheme is doubled to emphasise the importance of this characteristic.

Table 4 Assessment Criteria by scheme

Scheme	Main (Stage 1 & 2)	Extra (Stage 1 & 2)	Capability & Capacity
Score			
Biodiversity Impact	0-6 points	0-6 points	
Poverty Reduction	0-6 points	0-6 points	
Technical Merit	0-6 points	0-6 points	0-6 points
Capability & Capacity			0-6 points
Scaling Potential <sup>a</sup>		(0-6 points) doubled	

### 6.1 Darwin Initiative Main

The **same criteria are used at Stage 1 and Stage 2**, but the assessors acknowledge the significant differences between the two stages, especially differences in the supporting materials (e.g. CVs are not required at Stage 1), and evidence requested.

- At **Stage 1** the Assessors are looking for applicants and proposals that have the **potential to deliver a competitive proposal** at Stage 2.
- At **Stage 2**, Assessors are looking for **evidence** that proposals are **innovative and distinctive**, with a strong probability of **delivering sustainable benefits** and a **scalable approach**.

### 6.2 Darwin Initiative Extra

Assessors are looking for **evidence** that proposals are likely to **facilitate sustainable benefits**, while clearly demonstrating the **capability to scale further**.

## 6.3 Darwin Initiative Capability and Capacity

Assessors are looking for strong proposals that will **strengthen the capability and capacity of national and local organisations** to develop and deliver effective and successful biodiversity conservation and multidimensional poverty reduction projects in the eligible countries.

## 6.4 Assessment Criteria

The **quality and extent of evidence** provided in applications is **assessed, taking into account the characteristics set out** under each score, to determine a single score (0-6) with 4 being the indicative scoring threshold of a competitive application. Some scores are doubled to emphasise the key characteristics of the scheme (see Extra).

### Biodiversity Impact Score (0-6 points)

For all applications, the following criteria will be assessed:

- 1) Demonstrates a clear, evidence informed understanding of the **priority drivers of biodiversity loss** in the target hotspot.
- 2) Sets out substantive biodiversity outcomes, specifying what will improve (e.g., habitat condition, species status, connectivity, or reduction in pressures) and why the change matters.
- 3) Targets provided for Standard Indicator results related to biodiversity conservation are well aligned with the Theory of Change, which provides a **plausible causal pathway** from outputs to biodiversity outcomes. The proposal: is ambitious about the potential outcomes; transparent about feasibility, uncertainty, assumptions, and risks; and provides evidence that is proportionate to the project stage and context.

**In addition**, these criteria will be assessed for Stage 2:

- 4) Clear justification provided for why the project will focus where it plans to focus - compliant with Sections 1.2 and 1.3 on eligible biodiversity hotspots and countries.
- 5) It is clear how the project's biodiversity outputs and outcomes will be monitored and measured, using the Darwin Initiative Standard Indicators or a clear explanation why different output and outcome metrics are more appropriate.
- 6) Where the project seeks to influence governance or policy, it clearly explains how **evidence** of biodiversity and ecosystem services will be **incorporated into decision making** at the local and/or national level.

### Poverty Reduction Score (0-6 points)

For all applications, the following criteria will be assessed:

- 1) Demonstrates a clear, evidence-informed understanding of **nature-related drivers of poverty**, or **nature-related opportunities to reduce poverty** in the target hotspot.
- 2) Sets out substantive **outcomes/benefits** for poor women and men, specifying what will improve (e.g., incomes, health outcomes, voice and participation) and why the change matters locally.
- 3) Targets provided for Standard Indicator results related to poverty reduction are well aligned with the Theory of Change, which provides a **plausible causal pathway** from outputs to poverty outcomes. The proposal: is ambitious about the potential outcomes; transparent about feasibility,

uncertainty, assumptions, and risks; and provides evidence that is proportionate to the project stage and context.

**In addition**, these criteria will be assessed for Stage 2:

- 4) Evidence of meaningful **early engagement** with intended beneficiaries and relevant in-country stakeholders, including a credible account of incentives, constraints, and risks affecting participation and benefit.
- 5) **Safeguarding, risks of unintended harms** and other **ethical risks** are clearly understood and will be managed to a high standard.
- 6) Clear understanding of: who benefits and who may be excluded, and why; how **gender equality and social inclusion** (GESI) is reflected in design and delivery; and how **safeguarding risks** will be prevented and mitigated.
- 7) It is clear how the project's poverty outputs and outcomes will be monitored and evidenced, using the Darwin Initiative Standard Indicators or a clear explanation why different output and outcome metrics are more appropriate.
- 8) If engaging in markets or economic activities, up to date **market evidence** underpins the proposed approach and demonstrates that it is likely to be **commercially viable**.

### ***Technical Merit Score (0-6 points)***

For all applications, the following criteria will be assessed:

- 1) The **methodology** is feasible, clear and appropriate to meet the identified need, achieving the outcome within a realistic timeframe and cost.
- 2) Demonstrates early and strong participation of **local partners, stakeholders, and communities**, with clear and appropriate roles and responsibilities.
- 3) Expected **Outputs and Outcomes** are new, additional, and appropriately ambitious.
- 4) The approach to sustain changes beyond donor funding is robust and will support long-term commitment beyond the lifetime of the project funding.

**In addition**, these criteria will be assessed for Stage 2/Single Stage applications.

- 5) Sufficient evidence is provided to support the proposed approach.
- 6) Demonstrates how it will strengthen the **capability and capacity of local partners** and outlines a **highly collaborative approach**.
- 7) A robust budget is presented, and the project demonstrates **good value for money** (including the ability to **leverage** other sources of funding, where appropriate) in terms of the expected **impact relative to cost**.
- 8) The outlined approach does not undermine or duplicate existing work.
- 9) **Risks** are clearly identified, assessed, and have robust **mitigation actions**.
- 10) The **Project Team** has the capability and capacity to deliver at a **high-quality technical and professional standard** as evidenced by the submitted CVs, and identified local partners.
- 11) The project's achievements are likely to be durable and there is a clear exit strategy.
- 12) Provides a clear plan of how it will **make evidence** (including data, lessons learnt and best practices) **widely available and accessible**.
- 13) The approach is **adaptive and agile**, capable of effectively responding to changing contexts and feedback on progress.

### Capability & Capacity Score (0-6 points)

- 1) Demonstrates strong **evidence** of a clearly **identified and defined in-country capability and capacity need**,
- 2) Targets a need **that constrains efforts to tackle a major driver of biodiversity loss in one or more of the 13 priority hotspots**.
- 3) The work is **new and additional**, building on and not repeating past training, capability or capacity building and strengthening.
- 4) The **methodologies** to build and embed capability and capacity are **sound and appropriate**.
- 5) **Safeguarding** and **ethical issues** are clearly understood and will be managed to a high standard.
- 6) **Gender equality and social inclusion** is understood and appropriately reflected in the project's design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation; intentional or unintentional increased inequality or exclusion will be prevented.
- 7) There is a **clear legacy** that the strengthened capability and capacity will **result in new strong biodiversity conservation and multidimensional poverty reduction outcomes**.

### Scale and Scaling Potential Score (0-6 points)

For all applications, the following criteria will be assessed:

- 1) **Scale of expected outcomes for biodiversity and people** is ambitious relative to funding sought.
- 2) Sets out a **clear mechanism for scaling**, such as: policy adoption and enforcement, market replication or product/service diffusion, institutionalisation into government or private sector practice, financing mechanisms that enable rollout (public, private, blended), network diffusion via local partners/communities.
- 3) The project builds on a named previous Biodiversity Challenge Fund grant and outlines how it will leverage existing capacity to support delivery of this new project.

**In addition**, these criteria will be assessed for Stage 2 applications.

- 4) The Lead Organisation is **highly organised** with the **capabilities and capacity** to facilitate change at scale.
- 5) The approach demonstrates an understanding of **human behaviour** change, relevant politics and economics, and stakeholders' incentives.
- 6) The project provides a **very strong evidence base** from previous BCFs grants and political-economic understanding to provide **confidence** that it can **deliver at this scale on a pathway to greater ambition**.
- 7) Where applicable, there are significant **areas/markets** that **share the key characteristics** of the project site(s); the **opportunities where to scale are clearly articulated**.
- 8) The partners have established **relationships with actors** with the capability, capacity and incentives to support and scale the desired change or have credible plans to build these relationships.
- 9) Where possible, **trade-offs** and **factors impacting the rates** of uptake and adoption are understood and articulated.
- 10) **Impact can still be delivered** if uptake is significantly **lower or slower** than anticipated.

## 6.5 Assessment Scoring

Points	Description
6	<i>Strong Demonstration of Evidence.</i> Substantial evidence presented that it <b>meets all the of assessment criteria, with no concerns raised</b> ; the majority of which are met to a high standard. There may be a few minor issues which if addressed may improve the project, but they are unlikely to be detrimental to the delivery of the project and should not prevent it from being funded without changes being made.
5	<i>Good Demonstration of Evidence.</i> Good evidence presented that it <b>meets most of the assessment criteria, no major concerns identified</b> . The met criteria are mostly to a high standard. There are minor issues that could improve the project, but should not prevent it from being funded. It is likely to significantly contribute to the objectives of the Darwin Initiative.
4	<i>Acceptable Demonstration of Evidence.</i> The proposed project <b>meets most of the assessment criteria, no major concerns identified</b> . The criteria it does meet are often to a good standard. There are a few minor issues that would improve this project which they would be advised to consider if funded. It is likely to contribute to the objectives of the Darwin Initiative.
<b><i>Indicative scoring threshold of competitive applications</i></b>	
3	<i>Moderate Demonstration of Evidence.</i> The project <b>meets many of the assessment criteria, some concerns raised</b> . Those met criteria are largely to an acceptable standard, and the concerns can be addressed. It has the potential to contribute to the objectives of the Darwin Initiative, if the issues are addressed to strengthen it.
2	<i>Weak Demonstration of Evidence.</i> The project <b>meets some of the assessment criteria, or has raised concerns</b> . Those criteria it does meet are to a modest standard, but the application requires important changes to address the concerns and assessment criteria in order to make it competitive.
1	<i>Minimal Demonstration of Evidence.</i> The proposed project is unsatisfactory and <b>meets only a few criteria, or raises important concerns</b> . The proposal is likely to require significant revision.
0	<i>No Demonstration of Evidence.</i> The projects <b>fails to meet any of the criteria outlined and raises serious concerns</b> e.g. flawed approach, subject to serious technical difficulties or risks, unclearly written that it cannot be properly assessed, or is duplicative.

## Annex A. Eligible countries and biodiversity hotspots

Table 5 Eligible countries and biodiversity hotspots

Country name	OECD DAC rating <sup>16</sup>	Terrestrial eligibility hotspots <sup>17</sup>
Bolivia	LMIC	Tropical Andes; Amazon
Brazil	UMIC	Amazon
Cambodia	LDC	Indo-Burma
<b>Cameroon</b>	LMIC	Guinean Forests of West Africa; Congo Forests
Colombia	UMIC	Tropical Andes; Amazon
Congo	LMIC	Congo forests
Democratic Republic of the Congo	LDC	Congo forests
<b>Cuba</b>	UMIC	Caribbean Islands
<b>Dominican Republic</b>	UMIC	Caribbean Islands
Ecuador	UMIC	Tropical Andes; Amazon
Gabon	UMIC	Congo forests
Ghana	LMIC	Guinean Forests of West Africa
<b>Grenada</b>	UMIC	Caribbean Islands
Guinea	LDC	Guinean Forests of West Africa
<b>Haiti</b>	LDC	Caribbean Islands
<b>Indonesia</b>	UMIC	Sundaland; New Guinea
<b>Jamaica</b>	UMIC	Caribbean Islands
Kenya	LMIC	Coastal Forests of Eastern Africa; Eastern Afromontane
Laos	LDC	Indo-Burma
Liberia	LDC	Guinean Forests of West Africa
<b>Madagascar</b>	LDC	Madagascar & Indian Ocean Islands
<b>Malaysia</b>	UMIC	Sundaland
<b>Mauritius</b>	UMIC	Madagascar & Indian Ocean Islands
Mozambique	LDC	Coastal Forests of Eastern Africa; Eastern Afromontane
Nepal	LDC	Himalaya
Nigeria	LMIC	Guinean Forests of West Africa
<b>Papua New Guinea</b>	LMIC	New Guinea
Peru	UMIC	Tropical Andes; Amazon
<b>Philippines</b>	LMIC	Philippines
<b>St Lucia</b>	UMIC	Caribbean Islands
<b>St Vincent</b>	UMIC	Caribbean Islands
Tanzania	LDC	Coastal Forests of Eastern Africa; Eastern Afromontane
<b>Thailand</b>	UMIC	Indo-Burma
<b>Vietnam</b>	LMIC	Indo-Burma
Zimbabwe	LMIC	Eastern Afromontane

<sup>16</sup> LDC = Least Developed Country; LMIC = Lower Middle Income Country; UMIC = Upper Middle Income Country

<sup>17</sup> Marine ecosystem is eligible for countries in bold; freshwater ecosystem is eligible for all eligible countries

## Annex B. Safeguarding

### Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Six Core Principles

1. Sexual exploitation and abuse by anyone associated with a BCF project constitute acts of gross misconduct and are therefore grounds for termination of employment.
2. Sexual activity with children (persons under the age of 18) is prohibited regardless of the age of majority or age of consent locally. Mistaken belief regarding the age of a child is not a defence.
3. Exchange of money, employment, goods, or services for sex, including sexual favours or other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour is prohibited. This includes exchange of assistance that is due to beneficiaries.
4. Any sexual relationship between those associated with a BCF project and a person benefitting from the project that involves improper use of rank or position is prohibited. Such relationships undermine the credibility and integrity of humanitarian aid work.
5. Where anyone associated with a BCF Project develops concerns or suspicions regarding sexual abuse or exploitation by anyone else associated with a BCF project, whether in the same organisation or not, they must report such concerns via established reporting mechanisms.
6. Everyone associated with a BCF project are obliged to create and maintain an environment which prevents sexual exploitation and abuse and promotes the implementation of their code of conduct. Managers at all levels have particular responsibilities to support and develop systems which maintain this environment.

Adapted from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) [Six Core Principles](#)

### Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability

The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) sets out the essential elements of principled accountable and high-quality aid. Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (PSEAH) is essential to this.

How an organisation should prevent and respond to allegations of sexual abuse and harassment is woven throughout the Core Humanitarian Standard.

The CHS Alliance published a verification tool called the PSEAH Index to help organisations to verify their performance against the CHS by determining whether they have the right policies and practices in place to protect people in vulnerable situations.

To access the PSEAH Index tool, please visit the CHS Alliance [here](#).

### Common Approach to Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment (CAPSEAH)

**CAPSEAH** is a guide to help all people and organisations working in humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) settings take action and align efforts to protect people from Sexual Exploitation, Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH). CAPSEAH comprises of safeguarding principles, minimum recommended actions and practical guidance.

## Annex C. Project Team CV

***All key project staff must be named in the application form and budget, with a one-page CV or job description (if not yet recruited).***

Key Project Staff includes those that make up the main project team, are critical to project success, but can be from any of the Project Partners.

You must provide a **one-page CV or job description** (if not yet recruited) for these named project staff, to demonstrate that the project will have the capability and capacity to deliver the outcome.

The table below provides a guide to relevant and useful CV evidence, and evidence that is less relevant to demonstrating the capability of the Project Team.

Useful evidence	What it demonstrates	How assessors will use this
<b>Previous roles/ positions on similar projects</b>	Up to date and relevant expertise.	If the roles listed are relevant to the proposed project, it will demonstrate appropriate experience leading or working on a similar type of project.
<b>Skills and knowledge</b>	Technical or Specialist skills and knowledge relevant to the proposed project role.	Relevant skills and knowledge tailored to the project; it will provide evidence of the individual's match to the project
<b>Country experience</b>	This individual has recent experience of working in project environment (political, social, legislative etc.).	We do not expect all of the team to have worked in the host country but, we do expect some will have experience working in similar countries. This is especially valued in the senior project roles.
<b>List and scale of project funding received</b>	The individual is good at leading projects, managing the budgets and fulfilling reporting requirements.	Good evidence of an experienced project leader in running projects.
<b>Less useful evidence</b>		
<b>List of courses/ lectures given</b>	The individual is a recognised teacher.	Gives no indication of their ability in a non-academic setting.
<b>List of job titles held</b>	Range of experience.	If this is a list of job titles i.e. lecturer, coordinator, researcher then it is unlikely this list will provide much useful detail.
<b>List of published papers</b>	Academic or scientific achievement but may not be relevant to the project.	A list of all papers ever published is of little interest to reviewers. A tailored list of papers, relevant to the project, will demonstrate expertise in this area.
<b>List of Post Graduate Students</b>	This individual is a recognised research supervisor.	Doesn't show that the individual is capable of undertaking project work, although may be relevant if the project involves significant mentoring of local students.